

BARBARIAN STORIES

BARBARIAN STORIES

BY

NAOMI MITCHISON



JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
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N.M.M.

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THE BARLEY FIELD

DORSET COAST

EARLY BRONZE AGE

FOR ISOBEL POWYS

THE man, Three-Red, stood at the top of his field and looked down. He had dug every inch of it himself on the days the Chief had blessed for them; he had not once looked over his left shoulder. His wife had sown the seed with him, saying nothing except the appointed words from sunrise to sunset. He had given the Chief half a deer and a woven basket and two pots of honey to keep away the white devils that scatter stones that are no use on the hillside, and send little grubs to eat the seed corn. But even so, his barley was coming up unevenly with great patches of bad bare ground that grew nothing at all, like an old man's head.

The fields at his two sides were not much better; he was glad about that. But below him was Ash-in-the-Air's field – Ash-in-the Air, the Chief's nephew. He looked at it with more and more disapproval. The barley shoots were even and thick and very green; there were fewer stones in that field. What had Ash-in-the-Air said or done? What had the Chief

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told him that he hadn't told to the rest of the Town? Suddenly he began to jump up and down with rage at the unfairness of it. When the barley ripened it would be Ash-in-the-Air who would have more than enough! He would be able to feed full all the winter, and let other people work for him and keep him warm and let him have their women, and all because of the corn in his baskets, corn to give away to people that pleased him!

Again and again Three-Red jumped up and down, stamping with both feet. 'Dirty, dirty Ash-in-the-Air!' he said, 'I hate you! I hate you! Thorns into your nails! Dung into your mouth! Rats eat you up!' Tears of hate shook out of his eyes; his hands ached, they were so tight clenched.

There was no field beyond Ash-in-the-Air's, just the sheep-land, with ragged tufts of white winter grass still clinging along the edges of tracks or round big stones. The rest, new green and daisies, sweeping down to the very lowest dip of the bottom where there were stones and clumps of stinking iris, and sea-sage, and wind-torn bushes of elder, and blackthorn in thin flower. Beyond that there was nothing: a drop into space over the edge of the chalk cliff, the shifting floor of the sea. Where the land rose at each side of the cupped bottom, the cliffs rose too; they were three times as high and dreadfully straight. In one very terrible place there was a headland of cliff, the prow of some undreamt-of boat sticking straight out, even rising towards the end to a still more fantastic

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height, and dropping sheer down from its two sides, past hundreds of under-hung ledges full of birds, to a small and utterly virgin beach of shingle, that no man could ever set foot on, nor even the little cliff foxes that, further along, climbed down to the sea's edge to eat crabs. Up and down, up and down that beach went the waves, edged with a little dancing, ever renewing, white line of foam. If one lay on the very short turf of the headland and looked over, one could watch it till darkness fell, and hear it afterwards.

But Three-Red did not like the sea. None of them did. Here, beyond the known and loved fields, it was the thing that lay over the edge of the world. Further west, where they could get down to it, it was a wet hissing beast that sprang at them again and again, and sometimes caught someone and ate him quicker than a pack of wolves. Sometimes it was kind and gentle and let you play with it; it spewed up seaweed and mussels and dead fish; it ground holes in stones so that you could wear them. But yet you could never trust it; one time it would be far, far off, playing with its own toes at the bottom of the shingle, but the next time you went it was just as likely to be right up under the cliff, ranging along, looking for you. Three-Red caught sight of the sea beyond the fields and the pasture, and, as it was too far off to see him, spat at it, and then jumped up and down, one foot to the other, harder and quicker than ever.

Ash-in-the-Air came into his field. He was taller than Three-Red and his hair was knotted through

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blue bone rings in five places. He looked at his barley and sniffed and scratched himself, and cleaned his teeth with a thorn. Three-Red picked up a stone and came down the edge of his own field. Ash-in-the-Air looked round and Three-Red dropped the stone and for a moment took the attitude and expression of someone being sick. However, he got to the boundary wall and looked over. There they were still, the lovely, darling little barley women, stretching up green out of the earth! Three-Red swallowed hard and said to Ash-in-the-Air: 'How have you made them so big?'

Ash-in-the-Air just stooped and stroked their tips and then stood up and grinned silently at Three-Red, who, leaning against the turf wall, began to twitch a little and trip with his feet.

'How so big?' he half shouted; 'how so thick?'

But Ash-in-the-Air did not know, except that the Gods must be, very properly, pleased with him, the Chief's sister's son; although perhaps also it had been useful to dig deep, nearer to them, as he had done that winter, a hand deeper than any of the others. But it had just been because he was feeling strong and liked digging, liked the funny stones and roots and worms that came up out of the earth and spread themselves, fresh and thick-smelling, or wriggling and pink, under his eyes. He said: 'I did it. My field likes me. Your field doesn't like you.' Then he said, just because it came into his head, not really at all to make Three-Red angry: 'The Chief says that

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the barley will have big grains this year. He says the barley will be fat and the sheep will be thin. You've got more sheep than me. He says some day he will ask the Gods to talk to me too.'

Three-Red could not bear it; he banged two stones together. 'The Chief must not say that!' he said. 'The Gods must not speak to you! You asked them to make your barley good and mine bad – the Chief told you how to ask! He must not tell you! We shall kill him if he tells you and not us. The big ears turn rotten on you, Ash-in-the-Air! And my sheep grow fat!' he ended defiantly.

Ash-in-the-Air looked at him uncomfortably; he did not like having his name said aloud, especially with those words tied on to it. He said: 'You have eaten black roots!' and went away across the fields; he did not like to be near anyone whose tongue was so bad, however much he came from one's own town and must not be hurt.

By and bye he went farther on, to the high edge of the bottom near the sea, where there were brock-holes. He lay on the grass above one hole, waiting, waiting, till he was as still as the earth itself, for the badger to come home. Towards dusk it did, and he caught it and fought it till he had broken its back, and went home and ate it for supper. The rest of the men went home too, hurrying a little as they got near the town, not liking to be out very late with the stars' eyes opening on them quicker and quicker.

But Three-Red stayed in the fields and his anger

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kept him warm and unafraid. The man noises were all gone, the beast noises getting thicker. He took the strong rake-stick, forked and sharp and fire-hardened, out of its hole in the turf at the side of his field, and held it against him with fingers hard and crooked like an owl's. He climbed over into Ash-in-the-Air's barley field, and looked round him once. There was no one, nothing, watching him; nothing, at least, that would tell — not if he was careful. He felt on the ground for a thistle and pulled it up. He held it in his hand, to all four quarters, to sky and earth and to the boundary wall. 'You see,' he said, quite loudly, 'I am pulling up the bad prickles from his field.' Then he stooped very quickly, with the straight end of the stick pressing against his chest so that the fork dug into the ground. Then he moved forward, shoving against it, so that it tore up the ground, tore through the small, quivering roots of the barley, the ruined, thin, green bodies of the barley women. Backwards and forwards he went, raking cruelly across the field in the dark, so hard at it that before he was half done he had sweated his anger out, and as it left him, cold and fear came rushing in. He just managed to put back the rake, trembling all over as he did it, and then turned and rushed across the side of the hill, whimpering half aloud with fright and horror at what he had done: a little, running man under an enormous, unfriendly sky, with his town only just coming in sight and a terrible weight at his heart that slowed him down,

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slower and slower, so that it was like a whole night of running. And then, at last and suddenly, the great hedge of thorns and turf that shielded the town, and a smell of men and fires inside.

He was late in coming out of his hut the next day. He wanted to stay inside and eat and be amused by his wife. But she wanted to get wood and turfs for the fire, and then finish making a basket, and she kept slipping away from him and squealed angrily instead of pleasantly when he pulled her hair. He had to go off, heavily, and then, when he got outside the town, with his feet on the turf that had been so cold and dewy the night before, he knew he must go down again to the fields to see if what was running round and round in his mind had been real after all. When he saw half the rest of the town swarming about Ash-in-the-Air's field, it seemed as if it must be.

He pushed into the crowd, and began talking and listening and pointing like the rest of them, very nearly as horrified; because by daylight it looked terrible, those great torn scars across the lovely, living field, like a bear's claw-marks on a woman's face. Ash-in-the-Air was crying and rushing about his field, too stricken and stumbling to help treading sometimes on the unhurt parts; he would tug at his hair and shake his fists wildly, and then kneel down and try to heal the scar, try to pat the earth smooth again, try to plant and hold upright the little broken barley shoots. Nobody was helping him, though they were

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mostly sorry for him and joined with him in crying, beating with their hands on chests or thighs, and calling on the Gods. But till they knew what had done it they thought it better not to touch. Three-Red was crying too; it seemed quite impossible that he should have had anything to do with this. Something inside him was saying very firmly: 'No, it was not me. I dreamt I had done it, but I did not. How could I? I remember my dream; but it did not happen. No, no, it was not me.' But yet at the same time he thought it was nice that Ash-in-the-Air's field was now no better than his. And it was nice that Ash-in-the-Air's pleased face was now not pleased. It was funny to have so many things at once in one's head.

The Chief came down into the field; they all stepped aside for him. He was an oldish man, but his white beard and hair were dyed red like a God's. He had a necklace of boars' tusks, and knobbed beads of coloured clay, and gold, and pierced stones, some red and polished, some black and glittering, and some transparent yellow. It was very heavy and knocked and swung as he walked. It would have been a good thing to have it touch one by accident. When he came to the boundary wall he drew his knife and slashed three times into the air with it, and then sheathed it quickly, so that no one was quite sure whether or not there were blood drops running down the blade. Ash-in-the-Air ran up to him, his face all red and sticky with tears for his beautiful field. He flung himself against

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his uncle, pulling at him, rubbing his forehead on to the necklace, beginning to sob and then yell curses on whoever or whatever had done this thing. But the Chief quieted him with a hand squeezing the back of his neck and a couple of words, and spoke himself, very clearly: 'No man has done this thing. No man has hurt the food of man, the life. It is not possible. It was a devil, either with his own hands or through another's. I go to make a sacrifice.' He picked up a handful of torn-up earth and went back through the crowd. But Ash-in-the-Air stayed where he was for a minute, staring at the others.

Three-Red was glad it was a devil. The Chief had said so. It must be true. No man could have done it, no; least of all a good man, as he was. No. But suddenly he looked up, feeling a queer hotness, and there were Ash-in-the-Air's eyes upon him, from the field. Very quickly he got behind someone else and began to talk. But it seemed to him that it would be better to burn the forked stick in case there was a devil in it still. He went back to the town and spent most of that day lashing on new spear and arrow-heads and looking over the old; he was skilled at it, and it took his whole mind. Also he made his wife chew at the tying sinews to soften them for him, and that stopped her talking and asking questions about Ash-in-the-Air's field, and what really those devil-rips up and down had looked like. People coming past talked about it during the morning, but by and bye other things began to grow interesting too, and

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before evening there was no one but Ash-in-the-Air himself who was still talking about nothing else.

Three-Red did not go to sleep at once that night; he could not help remembering, seeing again and again, a little picture which had not disturbed him much at the time. It was after the sacrifice. The Chief had been leaning over the smoke for some time with his head bent, perhaps listening. And then he signed to Ash-in-the-Air, who went up to him, and they whispered together for a minute or two so that the others did not hear. They stood right in the sun; the Chief's eyes and nose were running with the smoke, he staggered a little; and Ash-in-the-Air looked pleased as if he were going to get something he wanted. It was not nice to remember. Three-Red fidgeted and kicked, and at last pinched his wife till she woke. He had meant to ask her if people really liked Ash-in-the-Air, if some of them weren't perhaps glad that dreadful things had happened to him, the proud cheating one who said the Gods would talk to him one day! But when it came to the point it seemed as if it would be better not to say anything. If either of them said his name aloud — well, Ash-in-the-Air might hear, and, if he was asleep, as he most likely would be, perhaps that word would bring him, and he would stay and listen to more than was spoken aloud. So he did not say it, and the woman grunted and turned over again, and by and bye he got to sleep too.

It was not a very good sort of sleep, but full of

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twitchings of eyes and mouth and fingers, lips curled back in fear or anger, hair bristling faintly, toes gripping at the straw of his bedding. He woke up suddenly into stifling darkness, with the woman snoring like a bear beside him, and his heart thumping up and down, so that one hand went quickly to his belly, the other to his throat, trying to stop it. And there was a rustling and breathing by the door, something lighter and softer than rats in the thatch, a voice saying words he did not know, terrible, quite meaningless words that he could not catch and nail down and kill, as one can real words! And then one word he did know. And that word was wolves. Then the voice stopped, quite dead, as a blackbird stops singing when the stone knocks it, squashed in, off the bough. And there was nothing but the dark again, and that heart of his shaking and pounding him. Quick, quick he pulled the skins up again over his head and snuggled up to the woman, rubbing himself close against the soft warm fat of her back and thighs, feeling round with his fingers into the damp hot folds of her breasts and arm-pits, licking the comfortable friendly smell off her while she slept, quieting himself as well as he could, at last sleeping again.

As he woke he remembered the voice in the night. Even now, in the bright pleasant morning, the morning that all men love, it seemed no less evil. Yet he could tell no one about it, for that would mean telling them about the devil that had got into his forked stick, and all the things that he had dreamt the night

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eggs to be had by leaning over. But he began to think more and more about wolves, the detail of them, the slope of a wolf's back against the stars, the way they howled so that you couldn't tell where it was coming from. He thought of two winters ago when he had heard a dreadful shouting in the evening, and ran up and found a friend of his with a great lump of his throat torn out and eaten. The man's eyes had been open much too wide, as though what he had seen were worse than anything eyes are meant for. He thought of children who had never come home to their mothers. He thought of the inside of a wolf's mouth, the smell, the horror of it.

He was getting close to the sea: he was rather startled to find how close, suddenly becoming aware of the sound of the waves six hundred feet below. But if there was a wolf following one, surely one would hear it above any noise – trotting beside one for quite a long way, slinking quickly along the hollows, enjoying the smell of one before it sprang! He must keep a look-out for hedgehogs, though he was too near the sea for them, and moles, little blind moles that would be sweet in the pot. After a time he saw a mole's pointed nose and great paws hunching out of the broken turf under the pale green of the sprouting blackthorn. He crept closer and closer, and waited with an arrow on the string till it came right up out of its crumbling heap into the shadow of the bushes with its blind head. He shot, and missed. That was annoying: and supposing it had been a wolf

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and one had missed first shot and it had sprung. How lucky there were not any of them right down on the coast: how kind were the Gods! Though one never knew for certain. They might suddenly shift their hunting-grounds. A fire in the forest would drive them down. But there were no fires till the hot time of the year when the sun gets angry and makes them. Weren't there? What was it his wife's brother said yesterday about smelling smoke? Was it smoke he had smelt? It would be terrible to smell something else, some beast smell – yes, Them! – quite close, so that one knew – knew It must be within spring of one, but could not see where! What could he smell now?

As he thought he leapt, amazingly quickly, up on to a hump of down, and stood there, his quivering nostrils dilated to catch anything, his eyes flickering from side to side, his chest heaving, his bow on the ground, and the biggest hunting-spear poised for a throw. From a long way off, Ash-in-the-Air saw him, against the sky, that spear ready to jab down into something, and then, after a time, slowly lowered. He saw Three-Red turn and go down the ridge and seaward again, towards that jutting point of land from which the cliffs fell down so sheer at both sides. Ash-in-the-Air thought of his barley field, and stood very stiff and still with queer tides of hate and joy going through him. His uncle had spoken truth about the things he could do, the devil-whispers he could make pierce to the hearts of men.

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Three-Red stood by the edge of the cliff feeling dazed and tired, so dreadful, so long and terrible a shock and strain to all his nerves and muscles it had been, waiting tense on that chalk ridge, unable to separate from the tangle of smells the wind was bringing him just that one that he feared and expected, but sure every moment that it was coming – the whole thing was coming, the smell and the shape of death – over the fold of the downs – but which fold? At least if he had the sea at his back, it could not come from there. He had disturbed the gulls, they rose circling and crying all round him, grey and black, the sour smell of sea-birds drowning everything else. They came swooping past his face, angrily, the solid, pointed, grey bodies, the stiff-set wings, the little fierce eyes. They flew and flew, till his mind was full of a criss-cross tangle of them, up and down and across, the quickening curves whose circles never came true. He staggered, almost lost his balance, because of these immense, empty loops in the unsteady air. And then – then – through the yelling of the gulls, the dull whistle of wind cut by quivering feathers, he heard a sound of light, steady feet coming towards him across the downs, and he turned and ran very quickly along the edge of the cliffs, and the thud of his running feet beating down through the turf and chalk roused the birds from their nests, and they dived off and swooped upwards and over the top of the cliff, and cried their anger deafeningly against him.

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He got as far as the headland that jutted out into the sea and ran out along it to the high place at the end, for he must see! His other senses sometimes told him wrong, but eyes tell true! For a little nothing happened. He looked back towards the land. To right and left he could see the face of the cliff further along, with the birds either at rest on their ledges or dancing up and down against the white rock. Long lines of waves walked steadily in from away behind him, the back of his eyes, and went quicker, and edged themselves with white, and slid up the beaches, and stayed stretched out for a second, and then faded, dried out to the faint, long grinding of the pebbles pulled back towards the sea. Again and again and again he saw this out of the tail of his eye. But still through it all he was looking straight ahead, very hard, and by and by it seemed to him that he had been staring for a long time at a head with two pointed ears. And slowly, slowly, he drew back his arm for a throw.

He bent his knee and threw; he felt the spear going true. But the head — the head was still there, unmoved. Then as he watched and watched it, and his eyes began to blink and water with the strain, grey shapes came slinking from each side of it, came at him, so quick he could not see them clearly, only eyes and teeth and flat heads, and his blood they needed! He did not know after that where or how his spears went. He backed and backed. It took only a very short time. On the crumbling edge of the cliff he

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screamed, with his hands clawed and stiff against them; screamed again with his eyes shut not to see the end; screamed so long and queerly that Ash-in-the-Air heard it from the barley fields and went white; screaming felt hot teeth and fur right on him, and took the last step backwards.

STEAGUE FORT

KENMARE RIVER

LATE BRONZE AGE

To D.C.

“Justice is not a virtue at all esteemed by our moralists.”

A. E. on the Censorship in Ireland

MOT's woman, that they called Blackbird, had borne a child; then, after a week, it died. Because it was her first, and because Mot was away still, she was very unhappy, and her breasts were hard and sore with milk, although she had tried suckling a young lamb, and, sometimes, Snimish's baby. But Snimish, who was any man's woman, hated Blackbird, who was for no one but Mot, and, besides, still had the clear skin, bright eyes and long smooth hair of a young girl. She laughed at Blackbird and the dead baby, and so did the other women, half aloud and half afraid; and the men were part hating her because of Mot, and part wanting to be first with her if he never came back.

Mot was Chief of the pirates and younger than half of them and bolder than any of them, and if he wanted anything he took it and kept it. He had his eye on Blackbird ever since she'd been brought in

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after a raid as a tiny child, and as soon as she was old enough he had her. This year the good weather had come early and he had gone off raiding in the first of it and taken the bravest and loyalest of the pirates with him, and their best boat. The rest were left in the dun to take care of the cattle and women.

The dun was up at the head of the valley, within sight of the sea, but well sheltered. No one could have told quite how long ago it had been built: at any rate, there it was. It was quite round and big enough to shelter them all, one high wall of stones fitted together, very solid and strong, with stone steps up it inside going to platforms in the thickness, from which one could watch hills and sea, or throw spears; and underneath, in the foundations, were two or three store-houses, with big boulders in front to roll against the openings. There was only one way to get through the wall, very narrow and well barred at night. Inside there were houses made of skins stretched on wood, and two cooking-fires, and a woodpile, and a forge. In the daytime the women and children went out with the beasts, looking for pasture all over the hills; they had to pull grass too and bring back bundles of it for the horses, which, because they were noble and costly beasts, were kept tethered to rings in the wall, and waited on always by the men. All of the men were free; it was not worth the trouble of keeping a man prisoner, unless sometimes a few weeks for ransom; but most of the women had been raided from the coasts round about.

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Blackbird had scraped a hole in the hill-side with her stone pick, and buried her baby and covered him with earth and stones. Tired and yet restless, she could not stay near the dun, with everyone looking at her or touching her. She went slowly down the valley, stopping every now and then, with a hand pressed on her side to ease the pains that still kept coming and going. The sea in the sun was bright blue-green; every little rock patched it with white; there were gulls flying, and foam, and a sweet, light wind. She lifted her head to smell it; there was a turf and cattle smell, and a seaweed and fish smell, and over it all the heavy valley smell of flowers from all round her. She shook it off impatiently and went on, saying his name over and over to herself: 'Mot, come. Mot's ship, come. Mot. Mot.' It was so many days since he sailed; while he had been gone she had known pain and misery worse than anything that had come to her in all her life before: it would be all right again when he came back. But he did not come. They were saying he would never come. If that was the way of it all the men and women who hated her would be able to do what they wanted. Mot would not ever come shouting into the dun again, with his eyes and arms to pull her out of the crowd and make her shake with pleasure; she would never have another child of his. She wanted to see his ship come working in past the islands, the copper rounds shining on her prow. She stared at where it should be for a long time, leaning against a bank, running a hand slowly

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through her hair or fingering her hard, hot breasts.

For a moment she thought it was his ship, and cried his name aloud, but it was only the others coming back from a raid. Very soon she could see the brown black backs and long horns of the cattle and hear them lowing. She went on down the valley; it broadened out into rocky marsh and pasture, with a few trees all blown east by the sea wind. The cattle were being landed, wild and scattering and hungry. One of the men stopped to ask if Mot was back, then, when she shook her head, slipped his hand under her coat and pinched her. She stood to one side, her feet in the water; they got the last of the cattle out and a man jumped off the prow with something under one arm; it seemed to Blackbird to be a dead baby and she came nearer, horribly stirred with pity and memory. 'Catch,' said the man, and threw it at her; instinctively she caught, and before she could drop the dead thing saw that it was alive after all. 'What is it?' she said, and by and by the men told her how they'd found it and its nurses down by the cattle and killed the nurses when they'd done with them, then seen that the babe had collar and bracelets of gold, but had no time then, with the cows to get aboard on an ebb tide, to get them off and divide them up, so had flung in the baby on to a pile of nets – and here it was. Blackbird could give them the gold off it and keep the rest. She said nothing, but laid the baby across her knee, and loosed the

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bracelets and collar and the soft gold brooches from its wrappings, feeling its bones to see if they were whole still. She did not want it; she resented this thing that had been flung at her, but as she felt about its body her hands were somehow tender and milk began to drip from her breasts and soak through the woollen stuff of her shirt. The smell of it stirred the baby to faint desperate whimpering; she bent low over it and let it suck and live. Now it was hers.

For another ten days Blackbird was left in peace; but she hid away when she could, taking her cows out early and bringing them back late, carrying the baby with her. It was a boy: she called him Sea-thing and loved him a great deal; there was no one else to love in the dun. At night she ate her supper and suckled Sea-thing far from the fires; she slept in Mot's skin-house; no one had dared follow her there yet. But she knew they would if Mot still did not come.

Then Snimish and the other women began teasing the men, setting them at her: she kept them off for a little, saying she had dreamt that Mot was coming over the sea with a gold helmet. Then, about noon one day, they saw an armed rider at the head of the pass and shouted to him. He had red dye striped over his face and arms so they knew he came from the Chief of Over the Hills, and let him ride up to within a stone's-throw of the dun. He blew into a bronze horn that howled echoingly like a strange beast, then he made known to them that Mot was a

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prisoner with his Chief Niat; if they delayed to buy him back he would have his ears cut off. Blackbird stayed very still, with Sea-thing pressed tight against her shoulder; but the men laughed horribly and talked all together, and at last shouted back that Mot could be cut into little pieces and fed to the dogs before they sent his price. Then Blackbird ran and clung to the rider's knee, and besought him to ride slowly and the price would be paid. And the rider, seeing she was a fine young woman, and guessing the child to be Mot's, was a little sorry for her and said he would give her a day. But the others in the dun did not hear; already they were laughing and eyeing Blackbird, and the women were standing behind laughing too.

Blackbird saw as she turned, and knew she had only a minute or two to make up her mind: she came back slowly, facing them all and shivering, with both arms round Sea-thing. She went up to one of the younger men, rubbed herself against him with cheek and thigh and said low: 'I come to your house,' and peering round his arm as he held her, saw that Snimish and the women were angry and surprised, but the men were excited and pleased at a victory by one of themselves. While they were like that she called out loud: 'A feast, a feast! Drink round! Drink all! Hot meat and plenty! Drink again!' Now that was the first time that any of the women had dared to give the feast call; but it was just right for the men's mood and they came merrily into the dun

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and killed two sheep and an ox, and fetched out the skins of honey-beer and ran at the mouth at the thought of it. And Blackbird put the baby into a safe corner, and stuck her hair full of feathers and red wool and began dancing.

A little after midnight, to judge by the stars, Blackbird crept up on her hands and knees and listened. The man was sleeping like a pig, with his legs sprawling and his mouth open; she spat on to his chest but he only belched slowly and twitched a hand. Someone was singing brokenly at the far side of the dun; after a minute or two it stopped. Even then there was some noise, as the couples shifted and grunted in their sleep with pleasure and drink. One of the new girls was crying a little still. And then a man close to her vomited suddenly and violently. But by and by the whole space of men and beasts dropped into an even rhythm of sleep sounds, and Blackbird stood up. She stretched herself sharply and blinked and swayed a little on her feet; all the outside of her mind felt stupid and as if nothing mattered, but inside she kept to her purpose and gradually the heaviness of the drink fell from her. She had been passed about a good deal that evening, but she had managed to take something from almost every man, except once or twice, when she had felt too drunk or worn out; now she had the things all tied up in her skirt, gold brooches, pins, charms, even one gold bracelet with quartz hammered into it — that was from the last of them. Another thing

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she had was the flat, tool-marked collar that Sea-thing had worn the first day. They felt heavy enough for a man's price. She began walking over to the gate very quietly; the ground was sticky under foot with lumps of cold fat and spilled honey-beer; but the men and women smelt stronger than their food or drink. Very slowly she slid back the bolts all hidden and dark in the passage through the wall, under the flat, huge stone slabs of the lintel. Nobody stirred. She went back towards the horses; on the way she picked up Sea-thing; they were sure to kill him if she left him. The horses were tied to bronze rings in the wall, their bridles were hung on nails above them, she reached up for one. A horse turned and snuffed at her. She was frightened of touching it: she felt too dirty; even her hair was matted and streaky. She took up some of the horses' bracken bedding and scrubbed herself with it. Then she held out her hand to the horse; its eyes were less sad than a cow's eyes, more like a man's; its shoulder was level with hers. Soon she was less frightened; she loosed it from its ring, put on the bridle, first wrong, then right, took Sea-thing on one arm and led out the horse, always quietly, with her heart beating so hard it shook her all over.

Once outside the horse began to graze hard in the starlight; she got the baby rolled up in a cloak and pinned it so that both her hands were free; then pushed up a stone, got on to it and scrambled over the horse's back, falling forwards with both arms

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round its neck. It threw up its head and bounded clattering over the stones; she hung on desperately till it quieted down, then gradually sat up, still with a handful of mane, and at last got hold of the bridle. Fortunately the horse had started with its head towards the pass and kept on the same way; so she had very little to do at first except to get used to it. It was very furry; her legs pressed into its deep, warm roughness. She liked its smell; after a time it seemed to her that once upon a time, before the raid and before Mot, she had ridden on a horse; she was not afraid of it any more.

She stopped at the head of the pass. She had been there once with Mot, a year ago; he had shown her how far it was safe to go, and which way the hills began to slope towards the grazing-grounds of Over the Hills. Things looked different by starlight, but still she had to take the chance; she could not tell how long they would go on sleeping in the dun. She was quite clear-headed now, and the night airs on this height were making her cold and clean again. Sea-thing in the cloak was crying, so she had him out and suckled him, still sitting astride of the furry horse. When that was over she set off again, keeping a watch on the stars to see how she was going. By and bye she got very sleepy and kept on waking suddenly from little more than a few heart-beats of sleep; but after a time she grew so stiff and aching in unaccustomed muscles and sinews that the sleep left her. Dawn came ahead and to the right. She passed a

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stone that must have been put there, and looked away, in case it was a stranger's God. She was heading down now. In time she saw a woman herding sheep and spinning, and called out asking where was the dun of the Chief of Over the Hills. The woman was frightened and did not know him by that name, till Blackbird remembered that he was called Niat; then, after a long stare at them, the woman pointed to a sheep path along the stream. Blackbird let her horse drink, but would not dismount for all her stiffness, because she was afraid she might never get on again. Morning was still not warm, but every moment the dew was drying and the shadows shortening. She tried to hurry the horse all she could, and soon she was passing more and more herds being driven out to pasture.

Then a man stood in her path, threatening her with his spear; she cried that she was come in peace to the Chief Niat, and the man, seeing she was alone, let her come on, but slowly. For some time he looked her up and down, not sure, because she was riding on a horse, if she was a real woman, not sure how to treat her. At last, after walking all round her twice, he shouted down-stream to another man, who took it up and passed it along, and by and by the rider who had come to the pirates before was there, and remembered Blackbird, and said she had come in no more than time. So they rode together to Niat's dun.

It was different from theirs, and bigger, made more of banked earth and stakes, and there were huts and

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byres and thorn-fenced shelters all round it, and sometimes an odd sort of grass that seemed to Blackbird to be the thing she had heard about which bore sweet grains like that little bagful which Mot had brought back once and let her taste, and, as well, there were big, frightening dogs, and a great many children, and pillars of wood, painted very bright and carved with open mouths and eyes. People came running round her and touching her feet and legs and she wanted terribly to get away, only she said to herself: 'Mot's here. Mot is close to me. My Mot. Mot is here.' Inside the dun there was a big round house made of wooden stakes with mud plastered between them, and painted red, and a sloped roof of heather thatch. Blackbird had never seen anything like it; she did not know how anyone could have dared to build such a fine house. There was a fire under the roof hole in the middle that struck hot at anyone standing in the doorway. Blackbird slid off the horse and was too stiff to move for a moment, but held on to his mane and hid her face in it because of all the men inside the dun. The red-striped rider gave her a push and she went forward into the house in the middle, and there was Niat the Chief, sitting on a high pile of wolf-skins; he had a gold crown with boars' tusks sticking out of it all round, and the longest sword Blackbird had ever seen. She fell on her knees and said: 'I have Mot's price.' Niat glared at her and said nothing, so she began to untie the gold things and lay them out on the ground. When she

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had done, the Chief said: 'Is that all?' and she grew cold with fear lest the price should be too small. 'Bring me more,' said Niat, 'or I will cut off all his fingers.' 'I cannot,' said Blackbird, 'This is all – all I have!' 'You will see it done,' said Niat, and laughed and kicked at the gold with his foot. Then two of the fighting-men came across the dun, and they were dragging Mot between them. Blackbird screamed out loud and tugged at her hair, for she had never thought of him except as she had always seen him; but now his hands and feet were hard chained so that he was all cramped up and could not move, and his body was sores and dirt and his face was twisted with days of fear and pain. For a moment he did not even see her, and then he started horribly and cried out her name, but when she tried to run to him she was jerked back and thrown on to the floor. A man with a red coat and bulls' horns fastened on to his head came jumping out of the crowd towards Mot: he had a knife in each hand. Blackbird was trembling and shaking with sick sobs that seemed to tear the inside of her head and throat. 'Oh Mot! Oh Mot!' she said, and then, in a last terrible cry to the Chief Niat: 'Look – look at the gold! The beautiful gold!' and clung to his foot. He kicked her away so that she fell on her side with a hand doubled up under her, and as she got half up she heard his voice change from cold anger to hot, and he stood over her and shook her by the ears, till she yelled with the pain of it. When he let her go she saw he had Sea-thing's

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gold collar in his hand. 'This is mine!' he shouted, 'mine! My son's!' and Blackbird cried out, 'No, it was Sea-thing's!' and then, suddenly, 'Is Sea-thing yours?' And reaching over to her back she pulled up the crying baby from her cloak and held him out to Niat.

It seemed to Blackbird that everyone in the dun was falling over her, pushing and trampling to see, men and women together: she had to tell them then, through her tears, how she got Sea-thing and when, and what his wrappings and brooches had been like. She ended, and saw that they had the baby stripped and were peering at him all over. Then all of them made way for a tall and beautiful woman who came straight to Sea-thing with her hands out and seized on him, while the men shouted and stamped, and the women ran round her clapping their hands on their thighs. Blackbird stared with her mouth open for the beauty of the woman and her fine clothes and the great brooch in her mantle and the combs in her hair of pierced gold and the coloured and shining stones of her necklace. As she crouched there, staring, the woman turned to her and said: 'This is my son,' and kissed her.

Said Blackbird: 'Is the price paid?' and she looked from Niat to the beautiful woman and back again. 'It is paid,' said the Chief of Over the Hills, and bade them free Mott and give him strong mead to drink, until he could stand, holding to Blackbird's shoulder. Now, when she had told him all that had happened,

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Mot was very angry and spoke to the Chief Niat. 'Give me fifty men for half fifty days,' he said, 'and I will take your revenge for your son and my revenge for my woman.' So Niat gave leave to fifty of his men to go, but they must be back by the next full moon; and he gave Mot sword and shield and helmet again, and his gold collar which had been nailed up on the wall. The Chief's wife would have had Blackbird to stay with her as foster-mother to Sea-thing, but Blackbird had Mot now, and no need of the child, so she kissed him and said no. She was ill at ease here, too, because she was easily the prize among the pirates' women, but here were many longer-haired and softer-skinned and redder-lipped than she was; but Mot had not looked at them yet. The Queen gave her a dress of yellow stuff with shining smooth fringes of horse-hair and a copper band for her hair. She rode beside Mot, and he kept on looking at her and touching her.

They stayed that night on the inland side of the pass. Neither of them minded their bruises at all. That was all finished. And after this night Blackbird could be sure that she would have no child by any of the pirates; Mot's would be stronger. The next day they made their attack on the dun.

Most of the pirates were killed, but some got away into the hills and came back by and by, after Niat's men were gone, and swore they would always fear and obey Mot. He made them herd cows with the women for a moon after that to see that they did. Then he

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took them out on a raid and got enough beasts to keep them all winter. But he did not raid Niat's land at all until years later. As for Snimish, Blackbird had her killed, and the others skinned her and made the skin into drums. She did not mind so much about the other women. Mot and Blackbird built themselves a round house of stakes and thatch like that one in the dun of Over the Hills, but not quite so big; they hung up furs all round it, and Mot made a gold crown for himself and another for her, and they had six children and lived happily ever after.

A LITTLE GIRL LOST

YR EIFL, NORTH WALES.

IRON AGE

FOR RONALD AND DENNY

THE Town lay all along the top of the hill, with a very thick wall of stones and a ditch right round it, except in one place where you looked straight down over a low cliff on to a long and steep slope of stones: that was safe too. The round huts were thatched with heather and there were holes at the top for the smoke to come out; almost always there was smoke drifting about the Town from nearly two hundred hearth fires. In damp weather it hung in the mist, and then for days afterwards the soaked ground and the heather would smell of it. The huts were just the right size. When everyone was in and the thick wolf-hide curtain pegged down over the doorway and bits of juicy meat toasting in the fire, it got warmer and warmer. You would all be touching, or nearly touching, and the hot fat dripped out of your fingers on to your knees, and the dry rushes rustled and tickled, and the smell of the sheep just outside drifted in through the chinks round the doorway. And it was safe, safe, no enemies, no ghosts, no Gods – or only kind ones.

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Somehow, as she slipped and clung and climbed again, and spat the wet, flapping hair out of her mouth, it was all there, all realer and dearer and more compact than it had ever been in all her life before. And at the same time it was far-off and tiny, as if it had nothing to do with her now – as if it had cast her off. She dropped at the foot of a big rock, and stayed there panting and listening, but the mist was all about her like a thick blanket, but not safe like a blanket, not warm. Danger might still be half a hill-side away or it might be almost on her, just preparing to spring. She clutched with both arms at her sides, trying hard to see, wrinkling her nose to smell; there was still nothing but mist drifting past and up, coldly and maddeningly. She licked at a cranberry stain on her hand, and started to climb again. She was a very small girl, and her mother was dead. The rock had been real and sheltering in this terrible grey world where she was lost. Only she knew she must go uphill all the time. Uphill somewhere the Town must be.

It was her own fault. She had gone the wrong way round the Spotted Stone and now the sun knew and was hiding, had called the mist out of the ground, and sent secret word to the Crow-Men – the enemies – at the far side of the strath. It had been bright daylight in the early morning when she did it, half by accident and half because her father had snatched her away from a wonderful game of cooking with the others and some beetles, to go and get cranberries. When she knew she had done it, first there had been an odd little

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shock, as though someone had hit her hard in the middle, and then she had grown suddenly quite hard, like one of the beetles, and had gone off for her basket without even saying she was sorry to the Spotted Stone, or pinching herself, or going three times round the right way. And while she was on her way, going farther away from it, trotting between the houses and through the gap in the wall and on down the steep paths to the lower slopes of the hill, it had still been fine and clear, and she had still felt hard and angry.

She had picked till the basket was nearly full and as heavy as she could get back with easily. And then, very quickly, shadows had crept up and swept over her and the hills, and it had grown colder, and then the mist had begun to come, blowing thinly along from all ways at once, dizzying her. It had taken that much time for the sun to know what she had done to the Spotted Stone.

But it was still fairly easy to see, and only a little frightening, when she heard voices, coming on them suddenly round a corner of the hill. There were men standing together, more of them than the fingers of both hands three times over. They had swords and spears and wicker shields, the blue war-stain on their faces, and crows' feathers in their hair; so she knew they were enemies, and then, because she was still such a little girl, she had squeaked once, like a mouse in a trap. One of them had looked round and jumped for her. She ran, clinging to her basket still, scuttering, blind-eyed, down the sheep paths with the enormous

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strides of the Crow-Man coming nearer and nearer. The path turned up-hill; she could not face it. But straight ahead the heather ended in a bright paleness of bog-moss, tufted with a few reeds, and it came to her between two breaths that here was her chance. She had crossed the bog thereabouts before, when the children were all out sheep-herding and chasing butterflies between times. Her eye caught a zigzag path of reed tufts across it – jumping, and then she dropped the basket and took the first jump. She was light and quick and in desperate terror; she went in ankle deep and once knee deep, but all at once she found herself on stones and heather again. For one moment she stopped, gasping and looking over her shoulder; the Crow-Man was floundering up to mid-thigh in bubbling moss and mud. Then she ran again, with a stone zipping past her head, on, down into the thickening mist. After a long time she stopped running. She lay burrowed into a bank of bracken, her hot hands scrabbling at the wet roots, her heart jumping and jumping at her throat. When she crawled out again there was nothing but the mist anywhere. She was lost.

Since then there had been hours of rough walking, stumbling, listening, climbing, and getting hungrier all the time, bruising cold toes and fingers in the loose scree. The mist had damped down everything, there was no squeak or flutter anywhere, only she herself, quite alone on the dripping hill. She thought at least that she must be on her own hill now – but even that –

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supposing the Crow-Men had got up too! At the best they might take a dozen sheep, at the worst — she just didn't know, couldn't picture it at all. Only it was all her fault, because of the morning. And she had lost her basket. Once she smelt a wolf and stopped dead still, but it had not smelt her.

She went on, she could not find any land-marks she knew, it might have been a dream. And then suddenly she came into a gully where the mist began to shoot up, rushing and pouring past her as if it had a mind of its own. The stones slipped under her feet, she could scarcely stand up against it, she was sucked along. With half her mind she knew quite quietly that this meant that she was near the top of the hill, but another and more powerful half made a sudden dreadful leap into terrified and certain belief that the messengers of the sun and the Spotted Stone had come on her and were dragging her off somewhere for something to happen to her. She cried aloud that she was coming quick, quick, anything to placate this steady, violent draught of cold air and solid mist. Looking back, she could not see where she had come from; the hard real ground was lost, she went on, crying and coughing as it blew past her all the time.

And then suddenly she heard a voice over her head, and it was more like the voice of someone she knew than a God; so she looked up. And there was the low cliff that guarded the eastern side of the Town, with the wind turning and blowing up it like a chimney, and on the top a watcher with a spear.

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For a moment the fear of the Gods left her and another fear came flooding in. She shouted up to them: 'The Crow-Men, the Crow-Men, have they come?' She could hear no answer down-wind, but two of the watchers ran together, grey, flapping shapes up there on the crest, and then one came clambering down to where she was. 'Where did you see them?' he asked, and shouted back her answer to the other, and pulled her after him up the cliff, suddenly out of the wind, into the Town.

They ran her along between them to the Head-man and she told what she had seen. Then for a minute or two the whole Town was shaken with men rushing outwards, to the walls, hurrying and gathering and peering down over the chimneys of up-blowing mist. Sheep and children were driven into the huts and then the women and boys ran out to the men on the walls with bundles of arrows and skirtfuls of sling-stones.

The little girl saw her father go by to his place, armed, and wondered how much he would beat her for losing the basket, or whether she could tell him when he was full fed in the evening and have nothing but a mutton bone thrown at her cheerfully, with perhaps enough meat left on it to make it worth picking. Or, if the Crow-Men came, perhaps he would be killed. She evaded a step-mother who tried to drive her into the hut. There was something still to be done. But, as she got to the Spotted Stone, there was a long yell from the far side, and before it was ended, others following it, and crashing of stones, and the women

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behind screaming and beating drums, and then, above it all, the level, blaring echoes of the Head-man's trumpet. The Crow-Men had come.

But she was kneeling by the Spotted Stone. She banged her head and hands on it to make it listen, to show it she was sorry; after that she got to her feet, sore and staggering, with tears of pain in her eyes. Then she began to run round it again, the right way. She heard the noises of the battle more confusedly now, her feet kept catching and tripping her. But for a few cranberries she had eaten nothing since early that morning. The mist swayed in front of her, the Spotted Stone heaved as she looked at it, but, as she stumbled again, there was a thinning and tearing in the grey air, and when she lifted her head she saw the Spotted Stone casting a faint shadow. Before the sun had quite gone under the world he had seen, and the Spotted Stone would be appeased. The Head-man's trumpet sounded again, a great round lump of noise rolling between the stone huts. It would be all right now.

NIEMPSOR KAR

FIRST CENTURY B.C.

IN those days the General, Niempсор Kar, went to war with the Queen of the Mountains, and killed her, and took the kingdom from her; and her two daughters, Yanivi and the baby Lallek, were his prisoners. Yanivi was a little girl with short yellow curls; even then everyone liked her, and she was sent to the Court at Shibrot, where one of the princesses, who had lost her own daughter, brought her up in the low-lying, warm city, among the shops and the dance-houses and the glittering streets.

But Niempсор Kar, the General of the West, took the little sister, Lallek, to his house by the sea, and there she grew up for long, quiet years, among the sand-dunes and the white rocks. At that time Niempсор Kar was living with a woman of Yoonistan who had been taken five years before; she ruled his household while he was away at the wars, and she had borne him a son called Tibar, who was a little older than the Mountain child. The two of them used to play along the hot beaches in front of the house, and they had soldiers with gold inlaid breastplates for their nurses. And when the General rode home after some great

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battle, they ran together to meet him, and cry 'Father!' and clamour to be taken up on his horse.

By and bye Tibar's mother died, and they all three stood crying beside her pyre, the children each with one hand in the man's. After that for years there was no woman to take her place, and Niempсор Kar had Tibar and Lallek all to himself. He taught them both alike, to ride, and shoot with the bow, to have a ready hand for sword or javelin, to go without food for days, to march bare-footed carrying packs, to watch the country they passed through, and all the things that a soldier needs to know. Tibar, being the elder, was the better in most things, but Lallek had as much endurance as he, and hated being beaten. She was nearly as tall as the boy, and more heavily made; her hair was fair and straight, while his was dark and curly. She dressed boy-like always, with boots of embroidered leather, and linen trousers and coat, belted for sword and quiver.

They had happy days, those three. For a year there had been no war, and Niempсор Kar stayed at home for the most part, and watched the two young things growing strong and beautiful and always fuller of life. And the soldiers and the folk of the villages saw them passing and felt they were a crown for the land, and many were the stories told about them round the boundary trees at evening.

For Niempсор Kar was a good man and much loved; he had never led his armies except to victory, yet, for all that, he did not oppress those under him and he

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spoke little at the councils. Only the Queen, though she knew what he was worth to her, did not like him much, because, she said, he never cut his beard nor got new clothes when he came to Court. But nobody cared what the Queen thought; perhaps he cared as much as anyone, since he could remember her father, the old King, and he took his oath afresh to her every New Year's Day, and always meant it. Yes, there were many to speak well of Niempсор Kar.

But it was another matter with Soogal Sorsh, the General of the East. It was said he was the child of the Rhinoceros God, and certainly he had a grey stumpy horn on his forehead. But be that as it may, he hated Niempсор Kar; there had been a quarrel between them at the mid-summer feasts, only the lesser generals had crowded round them and smoothed it down, and no blood was shed. Soogal Sorsh had a great, round house in the city of Shibrot, with narrow windows looking out over the roofs of the shops; and no one knew what was done inside that house.

In autumn the Queen wrote to Niempсор Kar, saying that it was for the good of the state that he should have legitimate children; he answered that her will was his law, so she sent back a lady of the Court, named Tathra, and a train of servants, and chests full of jewels and beautiful clothes. Niempсор Kar rode a day's journey, all in his own land, to meet her; Tibar and Lallek rode with him, dressed alike in scarlet and white and yellow, with high, straight heads and light hands on the bridle-reins. They did not care much to

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have their father married, but they knew it was the Queen's wish, not his, so they had a good welcome ready for Tathra. And besides Tibar minded the less as he was going off in a month to be a soldier. He might have had half an army to play with if he had asked for it, but instead he chose to start as his father had, with only his horse, his sword and his bow. Niempsor Kar was glad, but he said nothing; Lallek was partly glad, because this did not take him away as much as if he had been a general – she hoped her father would let her be a soldier too – and partly sorry, because she would have liked to see him at the head of an army with his helmet and armour set with carbuncles and white enamel.

Tathra parted the tasselled curtains and stepped down from her litter. Her hair was piled in a shining tower, a foot above her head, with a snake of bright diamonds coiling round it; her eyes were darkened and her cheeks were thick with scented paint and gold dust, as was the custom of the Court. On each arm she had nine bracelets, fastened together with green threads, her necklaces hung to her knees, and there were little bells sewn on the hem of her gauzy dress. Niempsor Kar and the two children leapt from their horses; he swung her up in his arms and kissed her; she laughed a little tinkling laugh like her own bells, and gave her hands to be kissed by the other two. Then they went back to the house and the feast and the silk-sheeted bride-bed of Niempsor Kar.

The next morning Lallek and Tibar went out early

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to fish for the great sea-pike that could snap their toughest lines and must be stabbed before they could be hauled out of the water. Lallek came in with a great spray of pink coral to greet her new mother. Tathra lay half dressed on a couch, with her maids rubbing almond oil into her feet. Lallek looked down, flushing and glad she was not like that, but Tathra called her over, and they talked, a little constrainedly. After a time Lallek asked: 'Lady-mother, can you give me word of my sister Yanivi? She came here once when I was a child, and once I went to Shibrot and saw her, but that is years ago now.'

'Oh!' cried Tathra, 'I thought all the world knew of Yanivi! She's the most famous dancer in Shibrot, which has the finest dance-houses under the sun. Oh, but she's light-footed as a butterfly on an iris!'

But Lallek, blushing again, had tears in her eyes: 'My sister a dancer! Oh, not true!'

'But it is!' insisted Tathra. 'And where's the shame? She headed the spring dance through Shibrot last year; she dances for us at the Court — she dances the poppy dance and the emerald dance. Oh you must have heard of her! If she crooks her finger she gets what she likes; there's not a man for a hundred miles round that wouldn't give his right hand for a kiss from the Mountain Queen!'

'She calls herself that!'

'And a very good name. Half the dancers call themselves after flowers and birds and dragon-flies, and who's to tell them apart? Everyone knows her

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with her yellow Mountain hair and her blue Mountain eyes. Pity you're not more like her, child.'

'I never guessed it – Yanivi, my big sister! and to take that name! But tell me, lady-mother, how was it? I thought one of the princesses had her for a daughter, as father has me.'

'To be sure that was it, but when she turned to dancing, when it was plain she was a born dancer and so lovely, who could have the heart to stop her? Not the princess, for certain, nor the Queen, nor any in Shibrot. She's as much a sight of the city as the Queen's orchard or the Temple of the Five Stars, or the Round House of Soogal Sorsh!'

And Lallek sat silent, thinking it all over, while Tathra looked on, half amused, half sorry for the girl. Then Niempsor Kar came in; he kissed his wife on her two white hands, but he kissed his girl on the mouth and kept one arm round her neck. He thought they might go leopard-hunting in the desert, but Tathra gave a little scream – she had never been on a horse in her life and she was afraid of leopards and deserts! But Lallek jumped up and ran out of the room for her spear, and shook herself, and tried not to think of her sister, nor the Mountains dishonoured. Said Tathra, fingering the rings on her husband's rough, scarred hands: 'That child should be married? Have you a man ready for her?' He started, saying: 'What makes you think that? She's too young!'

'Why, she's older than half the young wives at Court!'

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'Yes, but remember she's not from Shibrot, she's from the Mountains. They take longer to ripen there, but the fruit's all the sweeter when it's plucked.'

'Her sister didn't wait long to be plucked! Oh, you should find her a husband soon, or she'll find one for herself.'

'There's never been a thought of love in her head! You don't know her, Tathra.'

'Ay, but I know what sort of place a woman's head is!' And she picked up the piece of coral to look at, for she had never seen it fresh from the sea before.

After that she tried all she could to turn Lallek's thought on to love and men, but all she did was to make the girl think of herself a little, and feel she was a mark for all eyes, fair and tall in her boy's dress, among all these dark people. And for all Tathra's persuadings she would nor pin up her hair with jewelled pins and combs, nor would she paint her lips, nor wear the low-cut, thin dresses of the Court; and she was quite right, because her loose, light-filled hair was as beautiful as a waterfall in the hills, her lips were softer and redder than any paint could make them, and her firm, covered breasts promised more loveliness than the lily-scented revealings of Tathra. Once, for an evening, she had worn a woman's dress, but Tibar, half liking it, had laughed at her, and her father had frowned; so she never put it on again.

On a winter morning Tibar went joyfully off to be a soldier, and Lallek cried for a whole night and she did not care any more about hunting for weeks and

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weeks. She was alone with Tathra for much of the time, as her father was away at Shibrot for the New Year. Tathra hated the country and was always talking of evenings at the Court, jugglers and dancers and snake-charmers, and the games the ladies would play with one another, passing tokens from hand to hand and whispering behind their fans. One day some gipsy folk from the south came begging at the door, and Tathra had them in to play. The queer thing was how Lallek crept out of her room to hear the music, and came and stood by Tathra with her hands beating time to the tune; she felt like a wind-tossed bird, a wind-tossed blossom; she pulled off her hunting-boots and ran and danced in the middle of the hall till she had danced the breath out of her body; then she flung herself down and Tathra clapped her hands, crying: 'Well done! Yanivi could hardly have danced better!' But Lallek laced on her boots again and said nothing; only she wished Tibar could have seen her dance — she would have liked his word on it.

One day Lallek made up her mind she would go to Shibrot and see Niempsor Kar. Tathra exclaimed at the idea of her riding there alone, but she took arms, saddled her mare, and trotted off through the rain over the draggled grass of the sand dunes. The nearer she got to Shibrot, the more her heart was dancing in her; she would see her father, perhaps she would see Tibar. It cleared up towards evening and she slept the night on the wayside, her hand on her sword and her mare tethered beside her. In the morning she rode on

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again, and by and bye she could see the shining towers of Shibrot lifting over the far horizon. She was within sight of the western gate when all at once she heard her name called from behind; looking round, she saw a rider who had come galloping from a side road and was catching her up. He waved a bow overhead, and she saw it was Tibar and shouted to him. But he shouted back: 'Have you not heard? Father went to a feast with Soogal Sorsh and no one has seen him come out!' 'When?' 'Yesterday. And the Queen says she can do nothing!' At that she set spurs to the mare and galloped with him down the road to Shibrot with her hair flying behind her.

She hardly thought of her brother now; both their minds were off ahead to the great round house in the heart of the city. They gasped hurried plans to one another as they rode: they were going to take the General of the East by surprise. They pressed through the crowded streets, holding their horses up as they slipped on the stones, and shouting their news to the people, who gathered behind them into little frightened groups that trickled always nearer to the house of Soogal Sorsh.

At the door they both had their swords drawn. Tibar knocked with the pommel of his, and for a long moment there was no answer; they felt the house stirring like a kicked hive, and glanced at one another. And each thought how the other had grown and changed. At last a hatchway in the gate slid open and an old woman put out her head. 'Open!' cried Tibar,

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'we have to speak with your master!' The head disappeared and they heard the bolts grinding out of their sockets, and the door quivered back on its hinges. The old woman stood in the entrance, and they wondered much to find no more than that as doorkeeper in so great a house. 'Wait,' she said; 'wait here, and my master shall be told.' But they had their sword points at her throat: 'Lead us to him now!' The old thing whimpered a little, but turned and led them up the twisting staircase that started behind pillars in the corner of the hall.

Tibar whispered to Lallek, and then, as they passed through each doorway, they nicked the wood with their swords: it was safest here. And on they went and on, and turning corners, and upstairs and down, and under arches and over bridges, with the light coming sometimes from one side, sometimes from the other, but always through the same dim, high-up window slits. They walked close together, Lallek with a hand on their old guide's shoulder, lest she should run and be lost in the swinging tapestries at each side of the passage. They felt magic strongly in the air all round them: a thin trail of smoke rising through the floor, red mice playing in and out of the doorways, and now and then a humming above their heads like fifty dragon-flies.

Suddenly at a corner the curtain blew across their faces; for a moment they were half blinded, but Lallek felt the shoulder firm under her hand all the time. Only when Tibar pulled the silk away from her she

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found it was nothing but a great fold of the stuff that she held. There was a door behind the curtain – she must be there. Both sprang at it; it opened with a touch and they tumbled in. It was a small, light room with smooth walls; in the middle was a grey chair, and sitting in it, his back to them, their father, Niempsor Kar. They rushed up to him with their drawn swords and young, eager faces: ‘Father! We’ve found you!’

But he said no word and his face was all lines. ‘What is it?’ cried Lallek and knelt beside him, her hands on his knee.

He shook his head. ‘You too,’ he said, and smiled very faintly at her.

She looked up at him, shivering, but Tibar whispered urgently: ‘Come, father, come quick! Before they find us – we marked the way – oh hurry, this is a bad place!’

‘Why did you come, children dear?’ said Niempsor Kar.

‘Father! To get you out!’

‘So you think you can do that. You can’t. And you can’t get out yourselves, you can’t even hope to – ever. Oh, I knew you’d come, and I was praying all the time you could be warned and stopped!’

‘But we can escape! Father, father!’ – Tibar shook him almost fiercely – ‘Come with us, quick, quick! You’ve been magicked, but we’re free still. Oh, come!’

Niemsor Kar rose out of the chair and towered over them, in all the golden armour of the feast, with

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his beard scarlet-dyed to match his scarlet cloak; he looked at Tibar and Lallek. 'Try,' he said. They each caught hold of one of his hands and pulled him along with them out of the room. 'We marked the doors,' whispered Tibar, 'just in case – so the way is clear.' They went through two nicked doors, then a third. 'Are you sure?' said Lallek suddenly. 'Tibar – didn't we go this way?' 'We can't have; there's the mark.' Another door, and this time Tibar was uneasy: 'I don't remember that curtain.' Another door: they were back in the grey room. Lallek caught her breath on a half-scream: 'Oh what's happened?' But Tibar cried: 'Again, again! The other doors! This is a trick – I'm not magicked!' So for an hour and then another hour they hunted for the right doors like caged foxes, with Niempsor Kar always sitting on the tall chair in the grey room, watching them come back time after time, always more desperate and looking older at every failure.

At last Lallek fell at his feet with a sharp cry and lay there sobbing; Tibar followed her a minute afterwards: 'Father, is there no hope?'

'You see, my son.'

'But how, how? We thought – oh father, it can't be true!'

Niemsor Kar was silent for a moment, looking down at them. 'If I could give you comfort, I would,' he said. 'But there's none. Soogal Sorsh has us all prisoners here; he can do what he likes with us.'

'But the people –'

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'They'll not move by themselves; Shibrot is afraid of the Round House: no wonder. If one of you had been free to lead them – but there's no use thinking of that.'

'What does he want?'

'He wants revenge on me, Tibar. When he has kept me here and laughed at me long enough, I think he will magic me into something: one of his red mice perhaps. He comes here sometimes and watches me to see if I'm ready.'

'He comes here! Then I can kill him!'

'You had better not try, Tibar; I did once. We've no power over him in his own house.'

'But what can we do?'

'Nothing.'

There was a pause, then Lallek whispering: 'Father, what will happen to Tathra?'

'She's safe, Lallek; the Queen will take care of her. And I shall have a child by her soon. But God knows I'd give them both to get either of you out of this!' Lallek leant against her father's knee, crying slowly and all the time; she felt his hand on her head, but it was strengthless and comfortless. Suddenly Tibar slipped over near to her and rubbed his cheek against hers; she put her arms round his neck – and for a strange moment forgot everything and only thought how soft, how strong, how loved! Closer and closer they came to one another, breast against breast, mouth against mouth, and dimly heard their father saying: 'Ay, that's all you've left.'

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But Lallek jumped to her feet at one bound: 'We didn't come for this!'

'No,' said Tibar, 'but at least we have it,' and looked at her long and strangely before he spoke again. 'When did you feel it, Lallek?'

'Now,' said Lallek, 'when you came near me. Then, I was full of it suddenly, like I was full of dancing when I heard the music.'

'It is music,' said Tibar.

And then the curtains of the doorway blew out in a great fold and they saw Soogal Sorsh. Brown and black and grey he wore, and his skin was grey and brown and as if it was dusty; the horn shadowed his black little eyes, and he had a big mouth. Those red mice of his trotted in and out of the collar of his cloak and flickered round his feet; he had no sword. Lallek and Tibar ran at him together; Niempсор Kar, with the first quick movement he had made, sprang up to pull them back; but already Soogal Sorsh had stretched out his long ringed fingers at them. Their hands stiffened and they dropped their swords. Then as the stiffness spread over them, they both felt they were growing little and little, that their fingers were sprouting tiny claws and their bodies red fur, that they wanted to prick sharp ears and scamper on the floor; their minds were shrinking too and filling with mouse thoughts as their own emptied – for a minute that endured, then they were themselves again, but shivering and with bowed heads before Soogal Sorsh.

It was Niempсор Kar who spoke first, covering the

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tremble in his voice: 'You have us all trapped now. What do you want of us?' Soogal Sorsh laughed and the horn on his forehead gave a little tremble of pleasure. 'We shall see,' he said; 'all in time. You had the seat above me at the feast. . . . But not again, not ever again, Niempsor Kar!' 'Wait till the people hear of this!' cried Tibar, but Soogal Sorsh looked at him till he was dumb, and then smiled still more, so that all the teeth showed in his big mouth: 'What of it if they do hear? My Round House has corners for more mice than you. And this - ' he looked at Lallek now - 'this is a soft little she-mouse: litters of tiny wriggling mice with no hair. But I keep cats, so there are never too many.' Niempsor Kar came between the children with his hands clenched: 'I will promise you anything you choose if you let them go!' 'But you will do that whatever I do,' said Soogal Sorsh, and stepped back, and the curtain closed in front of him - him and his mice.

Lallek and Tibar cowered back to their father like whipped dogs. 'I can't!' said Lallek. 'Father, don't let him!' He shook his head, but Tibar pulled her over to him: 'Sweetheart, little pigeon, don't be frightened! It will come right, it will - Lallek, we're together!' He kissed her face and hands till she stopped shivering and pressed softly against him; then he picked up his sword again and gave her back hers. She shook her hair out of her eyes, saying: 'We must look again,' and off they both went with still a little hope. This time she found a new door and though it

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was not a door she remembered she went through it. She found herself in a long, arched room, with mirrors between the arches; she went along it, glancing from side to side, and suddenly she saw a girl standing in front of one of the mirrors with her back turned. The girl had yellow hair with its curls tied in bunches high on her head, and bound with yellow ribbon that dropped small sapphires among it; she wore yellow gauze trousers fastened at waist and ankle with blue cord, and her heels were small and rosy on her blue slippers. Her eyes met Lallek's in the mirror; she turned slowly, lifting her hands to the sapphire hanging between her breasts; she was not afraid of Lallek's sword.

'Why are you dressed like a boy,' she said, 'when your eyes are so much a girl's?'

Said Lallek: 'Tell me the way out or I shall kill you!'

The girl spread her arms in a quick, beautiful gesture: 'I don't know; nobody does. People ought to think of that before they come into the Round House.'

'I did think,' said Lallek. 'But who are you?'

'Don't you know me? I'll show you - ' She clapped her hands and out from behind a pillar ran two black dwarfs, one with a drum, the other with a silver pipe; they squatted on the floor and played, faster and faster. The fair girl kicked her slippers off as she started her dance; it swept her in a flutter of feet and hands from one arch to another, she was a summer storm tearing the leaves from the trees. And all at

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once Lallek found herself following, chasing the wind, with stamp and clash of boot and sword and quiver. Suddenly the music stopped and the two dancers were left poised, facing one another. Said the fair girl: 'You must know who I am now – Yanivi, the Mountain Queen! But who are you? Because you too are a dancer.'

'Yanivi! I'm Lallek.'

They knew one another then; they laughed and cried on one another's shoulders, and crouching together behind a pillar, holding hands, Lallek told Yanivi her story. Yanivi listened, sometimes with a nod or a question, sometimes fingering the thick linen of her sister's dress. 'I can't show you any way out,' she said, 'I told him I'd stay for a month, and stay I must. I get these out of it' – she jingled the sapphires – 'as many as I ask for. But there's no one to see me dance – I don't count him – and I hate it. The month will be up soon; you couldn't get out instead of me, could you?' – she looked critically at Lallek – 'No, you couldn't; he'll see me himself just before I go, and you aren't really like me. Your hair is like, and your eyes, but you're not Yanivi, you couldn't get all the princes on their knees to you. Not that I wouldn't fall in love with you myself. . . . Lallek, haven't you really had any lovers yet?'

Poor Lallek gave a great sob at that: 'Oh, Yanivi! aren't you going to try and help us?'

'I am,' said Yanivi, 'but I don't think the same way you do. Lallek, you are beautiful, now that I look at

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you over and over again; you must go to Soogal Sorsh.'

'And then?'

'Perhaps he'll keep you and let them go: if you're clever.'

'Keep me – for always?' The dancer shrugged her fine shoulders. 'Oh, Yanivi, must I?'

'It's the only way I can think of. You might get a worse man, too; he has the greatest treasure in the eastern world, and if you go to work carefully you may get the key of the treasure-house. Besides, if you have no lover – and Tathra's sister told me you had none – where's the harm? Lallek, he's coming!' She got up and stood in front of Lallek, twisting her curls through her fingers; when Soogal Sorsh came in she went up to him and pulled at the ring on his right forefinger: 'I want that!' And Lallek could hear the new, hard tone in her voice.

Soogal Sorsh put one arm round her: 'What will you give me for it?'

'Something you'd like. What are you going to do when I go away?'

'Hope you are coming back.'

'Not I! But what else? Nothing? Then you shall have a dancer as good as I am. Lallek! on what terms will you stay with him?'

Lallek came forward, trying to face him as her father had; one hand on her sword, she said: 'Let Niempsor Kar go free and unhurt, let Tibar go free and unhurt, and I will stay with you willingly.'

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She felt his eyes on her, looking her up and down, guessing at what was hidden; he shook his head: 'You put too high a price on yourself.'

'Does she?' asked Yanivi, and then, sharply, 'Lallek, dance! Dance for your father!' She called to the dwarfs and their music called to Lallek, who moved in time to it into the lighted centre of the room. 'You are a bird,' called Yanivi, 'a bird over a wide field.' And she danced a swallow skimming the light air among its fellows. 'There is a hawk! Take care, swallow, he sees you!' And fast the sunshine emptied of swallows – all but one. 'He is above you, he strikes!' and the swallow's wings dropped helpless and the hawk's claws were in her heart. Soogal Sorsh stooped over Lallek, his mouth a little open and his eyes bright. 'You spoke truth,' he said to Yanivi.

'They must be free first!' cried Lallek, springing back out of his reach, and Yanivi stepped between them.

'They must, must they!' said Soogal Sorsh, 'I don't think so, my swallow. I am going to have you on my own terms. You say No? Try and draw your sword, then.' Her sword was magicked and would not leave the scabbard; he caught her arm past Yanivi and drew her towards him; he was stronger than she thought.

'Listen!' she panted, 'I have a magic of my own – a Mountain magic! I can turn myself into a black stone, and I will unless you let me go!'

'Yes,' said Yanivi, knowing the lie it was, 'that's as true as her dancing. How would you like a black

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stone in your bed?' Soogal Sorsh dropped her arm and she shook loose with tears in her eyes. Yanivi whispered again: 'You see; and the other way she would come willingly and stay willingly. Remember, Soogal Sorsh, none of the others did that!' He nodded, fingering his thin beard. 'She would be hostage for the other two; they could do nothing with her here. And she has no lover, nor ever had, as all Shibrot knows. Look at her now — more than you could buy any day!'

'Very good; perhaps she is worth it. I dare take risks.'

Yanivi grabbed at the ring: 'My pearl!'

He kissed Lallek on her cold lips and bade her go back and tell her father, but see that she kept her bargain, or a horrible doom would fall upon all three. 'I will keep it,' she said, and went out with her mind racing over the hours between now and the bargain time. Niempson Kar was alone in the grey room, because Tibar was still looking for that impossible door.

She told him; for a moment he said nothing, then took her hands and kissed them, saying: 'Daughter, you have become mother and given me life —'

But she sobbed: 'Father, don't, don't; I wish I was dead!' and then Tibar came back.

He heard her and turned fiercely on his father, Surely you haven't let her? Surely you can bear to lie?'

But she stopped him: 'Tibar, I have given my word; you have to accept it, both of you. And take my

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sword' – she unbuckled it – 'I shan't want it now. Oh, Tibar, you do make it hard!'

He snatched the sword angrily and bit at his hand, looking at her; suddenly he said: 'By all the Gods, he shan't have you first!' and caught her hand in his. 'Come!' he said, and she shivered, with her eyes shining at him, and let him drag her out.

Niemsor Kar sat hunched in his chair, alone in the grey room, till they came back, hand in hand, honey-drunk bees. For a little time they talked, not more than a few words: there was so much for Lallek to say good-bye to, and she had so little will to say it! Then Soogal Sorsh came in, with Yanivi standing behind him, watching her sister. Lallek had thrown herself into her father's arms; he whispered: 'Say no, my girl, and we stay!' but she only clutched him tight for a moment, then let go. 'Good-bye, Tibar,' she said steadily, and Tibar seized her and kissed her till she went white. Then Soogal Sorsh took them out of the grey room and they saw there was still another door in the passage. Suddenly Lallek ran after and caught Niemsor Kar again: 'Father, father! Tell Tathra I didn't want to stay!' Then she went back and for a moment she and Yanivi were alone. 'Why didn't you tell me?' said the dancer, 'How was I to know it was Tibar?' But Lallek was crying too hard to hear her.

After winter came spring and from the high windows of the Round House Lallek could see the almond trees in blossom far below on the flat roofs

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of Shibrot. After spring came summer, and vines shot leafily up all the lattices and the days were hot, with no sea and no mountains. After summer came autumn, and Lallek was afraid. She was alone in the Round House most of the time, alone with the flapping curtains and the red mice and Soogal Sorsh behind any door. Her boy's clothes were laid away in a chest; now she wore silk and gauze and delicate furs and embroidery of birds' feathers; now there were twisted bracelets on her arms and ankles, to stop her running and climbing; now she had learnt to paint cheeks and breasts and knew much of the ways of man. One day she had been leaning against a window-sill, gripping the bars and wondering, wondering, what had happened outside all these months; she cooled her cheek against the metal, looking out and down where the ripening bursting pomegranates were only pink specks upon tiny trees. Then Soogal Sorsh had come up behind her and slid a hand round her neck before she had heard him; he tilted up her chin and looked at her closely. He had said: 'I leave my mark where I go; if that child you carry is mine, he will have my horn.' She had thought she had looked at him calmly; she had thought her voice had been even; but perhaps his searching hand had felt her heart flutter. He went on: 'If he is not my child I shall know what to do with him and you.' She had answered: 'Everyone knows I had no lover,' but he had said: 'When it is a woman nobody knows.' He had gone out and left her clinging to the bars, faint and sick and full of fear; for how

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was she to tell? She had been hoping every day that it was Tibar's child, but now – yet she could not hope it was the other's! But the Round House seemed full of pictures of the doom that might come on them both.

And west away from Shibrot, on a terrace looking over the clear, purple sea, Tathra lay gleaming on a many-cushioned seat. Behind her cactuses reared up their strange, spined stems and dropped great scarlet flowers, each with a honey-drop running off its tongue. Nurses walked to and fro with the baby, fanning away the flies and singing. And her husband sat at the end of the seat with his head in his hands. Tibar stood in front of him, frowning and scoring the cactus leaves with his dagger; he looked older now. Tathra was wondering whether she would really rather have him or his father; she shifted a little to let the dappled sunlight slide along her arms. But neither of them saw, and Tathra began remembering all the courtiers who had whispered to her in the days before the Queen had sent her off to this lonely sea to bear children for Niempсор Kar. 'If I had known how bad it would be –' said Tibar suddenly, and then, 'Father, father, why did we let her?'

'There's nothing I've not tried,' said Niempсор Kar heavily. 'But the Queen is afraid and the people are more afraid. If only there was war they might follow me again; but even that star is against me.'

The nurses passed again with his child among them; he looked at it blankly. Tathra spoke angrily:

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'She's doing well enough by now – not thinking of you two, I know that! If none of us had more to complain of – !'

But her husband threatened her with clenched fist: 'Be quiet!' and Tibar cut right through a cactus stem which almost fell across her feet.

She shrugged her shoulders, and muttered: 'No doubt the Queen is right.' Again the nurses passed, one of them dancing the baby up and down; this time Niempсор Kar looked away, and Tathra cried: 'You might pretend to care as much for your own son – the first child of your marriage – as for that Mountain girl!' But Niempсор Kar threw one arm round Tibar's shoulders and went away, not answering a word; then Tathra called sharply to the nurses to take the child in out of the heat.

Lallek had begged for Yanivi to come to her, never thinking that she would ever really leave her lighted dancing-floor for the hateful passages of the 'Round House. But the black dwarfs cried that she was come, and Lallek hurried to meet her: 'Oh, Yanivi, I wanted you so, but I didn't dare hope you'd come!'

Yanivi laughed and flung off her cloak: 'I mightn't have come – but for this: I can't bear looking at myself now, let alone dancing. When's your time? Mine's next month. But what's the trouble, Lallek?'

Lallek caught her and whispered to her – it was so good telling someone at last! – and then lay and cried with her head on Yanivi's lap.

Yanivi sat silent for a moment, plaiting a little end

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of her sister's hair, then said: 'Mine, by that man of yours, Soogal Sorsh – the curse of the spiked ear on him! What do I want with a baby? – that time I was here before. He doesn't know. But it might help now.' She started humming a dance tune.

'Yanivi!' sobbed Lallek, 'Yanivi, forgive me! I used to think I was better than you.'

'You are better at some things,' said the dancer, 'but not everything; I can dance better, though you dance well.'

'You must be the best dancer in the world!'

'You've never seen me at my best; I wish you had. When I'm rid of this I shall dance again; I have thought of five new steps. I wish it was over and done with, I'm tired of looking like a cow!'

But in one thing their luck held: Soogal Sorsh was called away to his army and was there from the time of the olive harvest to the time of fallen leaves. When he came back Lallek was still lying in the great bed, weak and thin-voiced, and the child was asleep beside her; quickly he pulled the sheet away and looked at the wrinkled, new-born head and the horn on its forehead – his mark. He straightened himself and stretched his arms, then looked down on mother and child, smiling a little and saying: 'I'm glad; I could not be sure. Now – our child!' He bent again and touched it gently; then he took off the great opal from round his neck and slipped it over Lallek's white, heavy wrist.

But it was pretty to see how much Lallek cared for

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her nephew, the baby without the horn; as much as for her own child . . . She was always with the children now, out on the roof in good weather, or down in the close-curtained, charcoal-heated rooms when there was snow fallen; here, while she was still a little weak, feeling too much of a woman, with all her boy days over, she was safest from Soogal Sorsh. One of the nurses was in the secret; she was a Mountain woman herself and the sisters had bribed her heavily; Lallek would have liked to kill her afterwards to make sure, but Yanivi thought she could be trusted, and besides, the killing might have been difficult here. Yanivi was going to wait in the Round House with her sister until she was fit to dance again: 'I shall come back like the new moon!' she said, and practised new movements and bathed and bandaged and anointed herself, and every day turned more to her old loveliness, with only the least added fullness of hips and breasts. She made her sister do the same. 'Why should I?' asked Lallek. 'What's the use? The sooner he gets tired of me the better.' But Yanivi grew angry: 'One must for oneself! Where should I be if I didn't love my own body better than any of my lovers do? Lallek, you are to do what I say!' Both babies were to stay in the Round House when Yanivi went: 'What should I do with one - a boy too? I don't want it!' And it was nothing to Soogal Sorsh.

So the winter went on, with bright days and snowy days, and Yanivi getting ready to burst out into the world again. She was the more beautiful of the two,

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there was no gainsaying it; and Soogal Sorsh remembered the month he had bought from her a year ago. He offered her what she chose, up to the key of his treasure-house; she would take neither that nor him; she was thinking of the slim pillars of her dance-house, the polished floor, and the eyes watching her all round. So it was for a week, then she said she was ready to go and was going at once. 'You are not going,' said Soogal Sorsh, 'you will stay with me.'

'Oh shall I?' said Yanivi. 'That's a thing you daren't do!'

'I've dared more than that; nothing happened when I kept Niempсор Kar.'

'Yes, maybe; but I'm Yanivi, the Mountain Queen, and more to Shibrot than any general!'

'You will have died of the white fever; it is very sad.'

'They won't believe you!'

'I think so, Yanivi.' So Yanivi was prisoner too, and winter began to pass, and the first long rains of spring came drenching down. Lallek stood by the window, watching the rain, and an arrow flew in by her head; at once she burnt arrow and letter, but she had every word clear in her mind and ran to tell Yanivi: Tibar and some of his men were to be under a certain window on a certain day: could they break the bars?

They cut the sockets of the iron out of the wood; they would come away at a pull. But Yanivi shuddered at the drop: 'How can we?'

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'Knot sheets and scarves.'

'Yes, but it takes time to climb down; if he heard – if he came –'

'We must. Yanivi: the babies?'

'You can take yours – mine! – if you like to risk it. He can keep his own. But it's terribly far down: suppose I broke my leg!'

Tibar waited below in the dusk, he and his men, and spat and bit on their melon seeds and shifted their porters' poles and did not dare look up too often at that faintly lighted window. People passed to and fro, but hardly any noticed there were new porters, and none gave it a second thought. A splinter of wood fell on to Tibar's hand; the porters were on their feet. Down the wall fell the coil of scarves and down the coil climbed Lallek, Lallek with the baby clutched between her and her rope. Everyone stopped and looked and crowded round and pulled at the porter's cloaks, till the chief of them cried out: 'I am Tibar, son to Niempsor Kar, and this is my sister!' The rope ended above their heads; for a moment Lallek hung, then dropped, and Tibar caught her and his men held him as he stumbled to the weight. From the ground she gasped and pointed: 'Yanivi!' And the crowd heard and passed it on and pointed too. They could see in the gathering darkness, first the climber half-way down the rope, and then the window above – and suddenly a shape in the window, a head and shoulders! And a cry from the climber and the rope hauling up from them. 'Let

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go!' cried Tibar, and 'Let go - quick!' shouted the crowd, and she dropped too. But the rope was swinging; she turned once in the air; Tibar ran under to catch her and thought he had her, but was left with a handful of ripped silk and her lying at his feet.

Lallek knelt over her, someone held a torch; her eyes and mouth were open and her hair was damp and matting with blood. A gong sounded from inside the Round House; Tibar picked her up and called his men to follow and stand. They hurried in the thick of a panting, whispering crowd, till they got to Shibrot market-place. There they piled barricades of planks and benches and tables out of the booths, and everyone helped them, and more and more came to join them with axes and knives and clubs, and all at once there were drum-taps and the Queen's guards hurrying up from the Palace, and in a litter among them the old princess, Yanivi's foster-mother.

In the middle of the market-place there was a flare of torches, where the shawl-sellers had heaped their finest wares for Yanivi, the Mountain Queen, who lay so strangely still, and Lallek, white and upright and shivering, with eyes sometimes on her dead sister, sometimes on Tibar, and sometimes on the child who cried shrilly against the roar everywhere about them. All round the crowd tossed, faces ruddy in the torch-light, arms lifted, a gleam of metal; and the old princess rocked herself to and fro, sobbing at the dancer's feet. And then hoofs and a horse plunging

NIEMPSOR KAR

fiercely through the crowd, and Niempsor Kar with both arms round Lallek and his grandson.

Yanivi was right: she knew that Shibrot cared more for her than for any general. The crowd gathered all night; they saw how Soogal Sorsh had lied to them; they moved like one man towards the Round House. Magic had barred the doors, but they gave before fire and axes; magic was thick in the doorways and passages, but it used itself up on the great crowd. Many were lost and never found, and for months afterwards men died strange deaths in Shibrot. But the Round House was burnt up, and somewhere in it Soogal Sorsh, and somewhere in it Yanivi's baby who had a horn like his father. The next day only the outside walls stood ragged and smoking: men all round were guarding it and killing the red mice as they ran up and down. The treasure was safe underground; half the Queen took, and half she gave as dower to Tibar and Lallek.

And when all that was done they buried Yanivi under her own dancing-floor; then it was made into a temple, with her face and form on the image of the Goddess; and for long years that was one of the sights of Shibrot. When her lovers were old, wrinkled men, they told their grandsons about her, how she was a jewel, a flower, a young birch tree in the wind, a song and a story for all time.

Lallek rode back with Tibar and Niempsor Kar, and began forgetting about the Round House. Tathra welcomed her with smiling, searching eyes,

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and looked at the dresses she had brought back from Shibrot. Four years Lallek lived in the house by the sea, and bore twin sons and a daughter to Tibar; but it was the eldest she loved best always. After that Niempsor Kar, who was now General of all the land, gave the Mountain Country to Tibar for him to govern, and they went away and lived there in the old palace where Yanivi and Lallek had been born.

Niemsor Kar had a son and two daughters by Tathra, and he made war on the Shark-eating People in the south, and conquered them. But one day as he was mounting his horse the stirrup-leather broke and he fell; then the horse kicked him on the head and he died before they could bring him home. He was buried, and they built a great tower over him and carved his name and the number of his victories on all four sides. And his wife took her children back to Shibrot, to the Queen's Court, and they stayed there. Tathra lived long; she was a very old woman, and Lallek and Tibar were both dead when their eldest son went to war and freed the Mountains again, and had himself crowned King there.

A MATTER OF NO IMPORTANCE

B.C. 54-51

THE Tribune, Marcus Trebius, came back from Britain with a good deal of military experience, a stiff knee, a few pearls, and a young and very bewildered British slave with bright blue eyes and bright red hair. He found that the military experience was not very much use as he was not in political agreement with Cæsar, and the pearls were less valuable than those of the East; the stiff knee was extraordinarily unpleasant and disconcerting; but the slave was going to be rather fun. The man had some fantastic barbarian name that no one could be expected to remember, but the soldiers that the Tribune had bought him from had nicknamed him Rudd and he answered to that. His town had been burnt, and he had been wounded, enough to take the bite out of him while he was being tamed. At first it had been a great pleasure to the Tribune, especially when his knee was aching, to tease the wild creature and frighten him; he had not hurt him much, because he was not really very cruel, and besides it was really rather boring, when one was a grown man at least, beating slaves – or getting someone else to do it –

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and then having them hanging about sulking and crying. Besides, if one was going to see as much of anyone as one was bound to of one's slave in winter quarters, it was absolutely essential to have something cheerful to look at! So by and by he stopped teasing Rudd beyond the point where it would be met with a grin, and took a lot of trouble over teaching him Latin. Of course the boy answered to a little kindness, and that was very gratifying too when there were so few things to amuse one outside.

Sometimes he went off to drink and play dice with the other officers, and sometimes there was cock- or dog-fighting. But he was not at all popular; his father had been a friend first of Sulla and then of Lucullus, and that was remembered against him; besides he had not much money of his own, so he disliked losing bets and showed it sometimes. If there had been any women to make love to that would have been something, but the natives were fattish and greasy, with no more kick than puddings. It was bitterly cold sometimes up in North Gaul; if it had been sunny he could have lain about quite happily doing nothing at all – or could have before this knee went wrong.

So he went back evening after evening to his draughty little hut and sat there, reading and making up accounts, and wondering how to make certain of being elected quæstor, and where he could get the necessary money. And on the whole it was some comfort to have the red-head moving about the place,

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cleaning armour, mending shoes, breaking sticks for firewood – making spells over it for all he knew. It did not interrupt him as a civilized person doing the same thing would have. The Briton was more like a dog really: moving quickly and easily like a dog in good condition. Sometimes he stopped reading and sat and watched Rudd, or gave him another lesson in Latin, or told him about politics: not that the boy understood much, but it was a way of thinking aloud and meeting with friendliness at least, not like the others, who either didn't care or were on the wrong side.

As to what Rudd thought of it all, he did not bother about that, or not for a long time, not until he gradually found with surprise and something like horror that he had somehow got into a habit of affection for his slave, so that he refused a quite large offer for him from a dealer. Britons were fashionable and fairly rare. It seemed to him that he knew an extraordinary amount about Rudd, partly from direct questioning, times when he had nothing to do and the man had gone off into long, trailing, tangled stories about his queer, wet island and the obscure doings of the Britons; and partly by a continuous consciousness of Rudd's feelings towards him. Very few of the others happened to own that particular sort of barbarian, and the man had been used to living in a crowd of others, eating and hunting and fighting, so now he was desperately lonely and the one certain thing about his life was the Tribune. So sometimes Marcus

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Trebius was annoyed with himself for treating his slave as well as he did, almost making a friend of him, and sometimes, he thought, after all why not? No need to make life a nastier and fiercer thing than it was already.

For nearly two years there was no chance of getting back to Rome, but after the fall of Alesia Marcus Trebius went south, and Rudd with him, staring at the new country, liking the sun and the colours, and ridiculously not liking the food or the sour wine. They rested the last night at an inn, not within sight but somehow within feeling of Rome. Marcus dreamt that he had been elected, but something had gone wrong; he woke with his knee aching as usual and watched the light in the room spread suddenly from dusk to dawn, and his slave asleep on the floor, rolled tight in a blanket, long and rather graceful with his red head on one arm and the other straight out and bare, with the fingers curling a little.

There was a rich merchant of Pisa living that winter in Rome, where he had hired a house and servants; with him was his daughter Decima, with a freckled face and black hair that came low on her forehead. She used to paint out the freckles every morning; she could hardly read, and she dressed usually in shades of red. The Conservative leaders sent their young candidate to this merchant to raise the money for his election expenses. It was obvious, almost from the first, that if the Tribune chose to marry Decima he could have what funds he pleased,

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but if he did not choose he would have to go elsewhere. He had not got too long to do his business in; he thought of his party and his career; he decided that it would be worth it – to get free of this constant trouble about money. The girl was the sort of fool who might do something he could divorce her over later on. So he approached her father, offering his heart and hand, and was accepted at once.

Decima herself, or one of her maids, was listening behind every door; she enjoyed every minute of it; she saw herself at once as a political hostess, courted and supplicated, setting the fashions, not to be looked down on by anybody any more! And the Tribune was just the handsome young aristocrat she had always wanted, with these quick impatient movements, this dark violent bearing that made her father look heavy and colourless. Even the limp was added romance. Her hot body would slake itself in his cool one. It gave her the thrill of her life when at last he kissed her hand and was formally betrothed to her; she longed for him to carry her off then and there.

Marcus Trebius found that, after all, he could not stand till the next election; there was nothing to do but prepare the ground. Still, he could put the marriage off until autumn as well, and that was something. But Decima wept and threw things at her maids and broke her new ivory comb. Would he love her still after so long? And – once she began to think of it – did he love her now? The dishevelled maids assured her he did; his apparent coldness was

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all part of his aristocratic breeding – wait till the time came to throw it off! So now, every morning, she practised the noble chill, and her maids applauded: this way were lovers caught and kept. From that she went on to practise the other airs and graces; it was unfortunate for her that somehow she was never quite in time with the newest scent or the newest scandal. Still, she must persevere.

This was all rather insupportable for Marcus Trebius, who was intelligent enough to have seen through the real thing that Decima only imitated. However, business is business. The old father was very much on the look-out for any slight on his daughter, so he had to be always writing her love-letters and making her compliments and sending her presents; it would all have been quite easy if the girl too had looked on it as a cash proposition, but he could not help the disgusted certainty that she believed she was in love with him. She had a temper too; he had heard her rating a slave in her own rooms, and seen her come out flushed and panting with little drops of sweat on her forehead still. It was an unpleasant thought that he would have to go to bed with that. But there! – she was only the least attractive step of the ladder to the consulship, and he was going back to Gaul soon.

He went to pay his respects two days before he left, and got the dowry finally and satisfactorily settled with his father-in-law. Then the lady herself appeared with attendants, her hair dressed high on

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her head with pins of gold and cornelian; her hands were hot and she did not seem able to keep still for a moment.

Marcus expressed his regret at going: 'But my betrothed will not forget me?' Decima's careful chill broke down at this, tears spurted into her eyes: 'No, never!' she gasped. The annoyed Tribune then asked what the beloved would have as a farewell gift, a token of remembrance. And what a ridiculous thing she had dreamed – she would of course! – of a ruby brooch for her mantle in the shape of a star with four different stones at the corners. A nice job he was going to have hunting about Rome for her disgusting brooch! He would do his best, but the time was short: there was no other gift she would care for? She lay back against her cushions and shook her head. Yes, there was, though! 'Oh, Marcus, that British slave of yours! Everyone who's anyone has a Briton now, and they're so dreadfully difficult to get!'

And what could have put that into her dirty, jealous little head?

'But that's not the kind of gift I would like you to have! No, I will search all Rome for the brooch. It shall be just as you describe it so charmingly.'

But by this time she was watching him like a cat. Yes, she knew it – he wouldn't! 'I don't want the silly brooch now; anyhow, father can give it me. I must have the slave!'

'But really, my dearest lady, what could you do with a soldier servant straight from the camp?' – he

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laughed uncomfortably – ‘I see I shall have to decide for you! What do you say to a pair of brooches?’

‘No! I want that man! You wouldn’t refuse me if you loved me ever so little!’ She seized his wrist, her mouth quivered.

He could not burst into passionate protestations to this hot, brown little horror! All the same, he couldn’t let her have her way. ‘Really, I shouldn’t feel safe to do it. He’s quite a savage, you know. He’s afraid of me, but I couldn’t risk letting him loose! Let us think of something else – anything – tell me, most beautiful!’

As if she believed him! She half sobbed: ‘There’s nothing else I want!’

Opportunely her father came back with: ‘Why, what’s the matter? Not a lovers’ quarrel already!’

Decima explained, with tears and clenched fists and protests that she would die of unhappiness unless her Marcus would give her tangible proof of his love!

The father laid a heavy and bourgeois hand on the Tribune’s shoulder: ‘Give it her, my boy! You mustn’t start saying no to ladies at your time of life! Besides, what’s a slave more or less? You can easily get another. I can let you have one of mine, an excellent man, for that matter.’

Marcus at that felt a curious dim sinking. It was not true, surely, that he had given up his honour to these people, and now must go on giving up – indefinitely? No, he was going to have the best of

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the bargain with them! When he was Consul he would be able to laugh at it all. And in the meantime what was it, after all? Why in the name of fortune should he mind about a slave? Decima, he saw, supposed he preferred the slave to her – well, so he did! That was easy. At the same time he was not going to let anything, including Rudd, stand between him and his money. He yielded gracefully and took his leave.

On the other hand, as he got near his own lodgings he became rather uncomfortable at the thought of telling Rudd, and wondered whether he would put it off to the last moment, the very hour the gift was to be made. Rudd, running out to hold his horse, looked into his face and asked at once what was the matter. He looked down before dismounting, hesitated, and then, angry at his own foolishness, said sharply: 'I've given you away.' The Briton gasped, and dropped his head against the horse's, holding tight to the bridle. Marcus angrily suspected him of crying, jumped off his horse and pulled him away. Rudd was not even trying to cover his face; he let go the rein and dropped on to the ground, doubled up, then grabbed at his master's knees: 'Why?' he said, 'What have I done?' 'You stupid!' said Marcus, 'it's only to Decima, only till the marriage!' And he pulled the boy's red hair cheerfully and told him to get up and laughed at him till he laughed back. Yes, that was all, till the marriage; why be uncertain about it? 'But you're going back to Gaul! You said I was going

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too.' 'So I did. But you aren't – see? Never mind, Rudd, you'll have a gay time in Rome, and I'll have to find someone else to clean my new helmet!' They went in and Marcus watched Rudd doing up his baggage for the campaign, and thought how he would take it out of Decima one day.

The next morning Rudd packed his own small bundle and started with his master for the new house; he walked so close to the horse that it trod on his foot; then he walked lame and that was particularly annoying for Marcus, first because it reminded him too much of himself, and then because what he liked best about the Briton was the gay and light way he moved: at least that was what he thought he liked best. Besides, though he did not think Rudd had really hurt his foot much, he wanted it seen to properly, and he became nervously aware how little he trusted the new household to look after his slave. He cursed Rudd for being such a fool, and then suddenly said: 'Well, anyhow, when I marry her I shall free you.' Rudd jumped at his hand and kissed it and as far as the door of the merchant's house he felt quite at his ease again.

The actual giving away was rather unpleasant all the same. Decima's eyes shone, her lips parted in wet, red pleasure; the Tribune preferred to look at his prospective father-in-law. As to Rudd, he just stood in the corner with his hands at his side, not looking in the least like himself. Marcus did not at all want to linger over this parting; he kissed

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Decima's hand, longing to bite it and make her scream, and submitted to more kisses from the merchant as well as being called, very solemnly, his dear son. He went out past Rudd: 'Good luck!' he said, and put his two hands a moment on his shoulders. He felt himself watched out of the room, and, as he rode back, realized that Rudd had been trembling all over and that his fists had been violently clenched. However, he supposed everything would be all right. Why shouldn't it be? After all — it was ridiculous of Decima being jealous of that slave. Even she must see that.

That spring and summer were trying too. There were no set battles, but long intolerable skirmishing with the last of the scattered rebels. It ended at last, and Gaul was peaceful; Cæsar had made a complete job of his victory and the Tribune was eager to get back to work against him in Rome. He had arranged by letter that the marriage should take place as soon as he was back; he wanted to be sure of the money; it was even conceivable that Decima might be improved after nine months' absence.

Also, he thought, quite surprisingly often, that it would be fun to see Rudd again. He had forgotten about him quite satisfactorily most of the time, except that the Gallic slave he had now was annoying because he was in some ways the same but actually very unlike, sulky and tame in his heart, and heavy-footed. Every now and then he had wondered what was happening to Rudd and wished he could have

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written, but of course the boy could not read. Yes, it would be pleasant to see him – he hoped they hadn't spoilt the essential liveness of the red-head at that house. Well, even if they had, Rudd would get it back again quick enough.

The first thing he had to do in Rome was to see his political chiefs; he would have to start canvassing the moment the wedding was over – all the better, Decima could not complain if she was left to herself! Much money had already been expended on his behalf; he was expected to do well. He did not get to the bride's father's house till the evening and then everyone was swamped in preparations for the very extra-magnificent wedding there was to be next day. He did not see Rudd and had no chance of asking for him. The next morning he had to get his new clothes, and also to pay visits on one or two of his father's old friends, who all thought well of his prospects, if he exerted himself and went the rounds of the most important people with suitable promises, bribes or conversation. By now he had got almost used to the troublesomeness of the knee.

Then came the wedding. He thought he had seen a red head at the tail of the torch-bearers but was not sure. Decima was much like other women in the dark; at any rate she could not go on pretending to be a fine lady without any of the appurtenances! He woke to find her sleeping beside him like any warm, healthy animal, bedded in her own coarse hair. He determined to be as pleasant as possible until she

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made it too difficult, as she must sooner or later. In the meantime, a little conjugal and affectionate conversation!

He saw a brooch lying beside the mirror and picked it up; it was exceedingly solid and magnificent and exactly – oh exactly, in Decima's taste. Why, of course! 'Surely that must be the brooch you dreamt about, the one you asked me for!'

Decima giggled nervously out of her black hair and decided to get it over. 'It was really you who gave it to me after all! Yes, it was, and I love it! Oh, I'll tell you. Do you remember that slave you gave me before you went?'

He nodded, suddenly beginning to listen.

'Well, about two months ago I went to visit Cornelia. You haven't forgotten Cornelia? Well, what do you think, she had just this brooch on her dress! It – it was fate, oh, I simply had to have it! Well, I couldn't exactly offer to buy it from her, so I didn't know what to do, and then she suggested the exchange herself. I knew, of course, you'd want me to have it, so she got the Briton and I got the brooch, which I liked much better, for really he wasn't much good – only, of course, she didn't know that!'

The bridegroom sat on the edge of the bed. 'I see,' he said, and then: 'What makes you think he wasn't much good?'

Decima was pleased; she was afraid he would make much more fuss. After all, perhaps she was wrong to have been jealous. Yes, he had loved her all the time!

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'Oh,' she said, 'he got sulky and sleepy, and he was as clumsy as an animal about the house! You know, Marcus, you were quite right to say he was only fit for a camp where he was under someone he was afraid of — it took us weeks before he was properly broken in.'

'You succeeded?'

'Oh, well, yes!' She wasn't quite sure whether to go on. She knew that it mightn't perhaps be quite, quite nice for a great lady, like she was now, even to remember how much she had enjoyed the breaking of that particular slave. Though of course Marcus ought to take it as flattering — she was sure it was, somehow. Better to change the subject perhaps. Marcus could ask someone else about the details. 'There's such a marvellous new doctor,' she said, 'I must tell you all about him or no one will think you know anything! He comes —'

But Marcus did not seem to be listening very nicely. He said: 'And where does this Cornelia of yours live? I should like to know, please.'

She squeaked with pure fear, nothing at all pleasant about it, and told. He was dressing. She flopped over in an attempted faint, but he paid no attention, so she sat up and watched him. He went out without speaking to her again. And what was she to say to her maids now? The brute!

As he went through the hall, a group of friends who were waiting to wish him well rushed up; he answered, but did not seem to see them properly. Well,

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they all knew she was nobody's young dream, but still it was a pity to show it so much. At the house he wanted, he knocked and asked to see its mistress; after a long delay he was shown to her room; she was surprised and, yes, a great deal flattered! But he went straight to the point. Yes, she remembered the slave, but she had sold him six weeks ago to a dealer whose name she gave him. He went out abruptly, leaving her to suppose he was mad, or drunk, and tell all her visitors so. The dealer was not there; an assistant said he would be back presently, but did not know about this particular slave; however, they had one or two Britons, if the Tribune would care to see them. He accepted eagerly, and plunged into the yard where they were kept, following the assistant who had been going to bring them out to him. He looked all round the evil-smelling place; he called aloud: 'Rudd! Rudd!' There were sheds at the end and to one side; he held his cloak over his mouth and went round them all. Some of the slaves looked up, spoke, caught at his ankles with horrible alien hands. Chain-links clinked and straws blew past him. He turned and went out and waited till the man came back; he sat with his hands clasped in front of him and tried not to think what it would be like to be in the hands of these people. When sitting still had become almost too much for him, the dealer came back. The slave had been re-sold a week ago to a fellow-dealer; the ship was due to sail to-day. If he cared to take horse and ride for Ostia?

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When he got out of Rome he gave the horse its head; he had ridden once like this three years before, carrying a message to his Legate, and he had been in time. He would be in time again – of course. In another week he would be laughing at the whole thing. At Ostia no one could tell him where the dealer's ship lay, but at last he found an official in a small office right down on the quay. He consulted a list very slowly and then said the ship had sailed at dawn; it might – or again it might not – be bound for Delos. Yes, there were a lot of northerners on board, Gauls and Germans, Britons too for all he knew; there was a good market for them in Asia. But horse and rider had turned away from the sea and up a side street.

He rode back quite slowly. That was all over; there was no possibility now of ever seeing Rudd again or giving him that promised freedom. As far as Rudd himself was concerned it did not do to think too much; it might be true that a savage could not feel in the way he did, would forget and make himself another life wherever it was; at any rate that was not, and could not be, his concern now. And he had better forget too; why make so much fuss about a slave when there are plenty more? Why for that matter fuss about youth and health and honour, all things that pass and go? He would go back and attend to his canvassing.

All the same he was not elected. He was angry about that; every one round him felt his black, silent

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anger. He did not stand again; it was simpler not to bother about things, but just go on living. It took Decima quite a long time to understand that it is better to be jealous of a substance than a shadow.

The Tribune was killed at Pharsalia, and Decima married again, into the successful party this time. Money is useful to everyone. There were no children. And Rudd, presumably, was sold to another master; whoever else was lost, he certainly was.

ARMINIUS IN THE CHERRY TREE

RAVENNA

A.D. 35

MORNING had come, had settled itself in stolid cheerfulness for a day of sun. There were miles of pine-wood between the house and the sea; the pines sheltered the cherries, and now they were in full leaf. Soon the house, waking up, began to flap squares of curtain, yellow and red; then, from the path in the wood, rose sharp voices of farm slaves trotting into Ravenna with eggs and cheeses and fatted cockerels to sell at the early markets. And out of the door came a young man, and quietly strode across the grass. At the far end he turned, staring and listening at the house. Time passed, and by and bye someone called; he frowned, tugging at his tunic, would not answer. Again the call, his name: 'Thymelicus!' Now, looking up, he jumped for a cherry bough, held, swung, and heaved himself astride the branch. A twig caught in his gold, wolf-headed collar, and angrily he jerked away his yellow head. Hate burnt and blinded him, hate older than himself, come alive again. His father, whom he had never seen, was the dead king Arminius, twenty years back Rome's most terrible enemy, in whose dark leagues of forest the

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frontier legions had been trapped and destroyed. In those times, Arminius had a brother, Flavus, good friend to Rome, or traitor, whichever one chose to think. Before to-day Thymelicus had thought very little; his mother had been a prisoner, and in Italy, when he was born; he had never been north of the Alps. But this uncle Flavus had one son, Italicus, younger than his cousin; they had been brought up together almost as brothers, fond enough of one another. Now, in an hour, that friendship had ended, and something older had come in its place.

Thymelicus climbed again, higher, sometimes very still, sometimes shaken again in a wave of anger. All round him in the tree bobbed maddeningly the hard little cherries.

Another came running down the garden, little more than a boy, this one, and dark with a brown not all sunburn. 'Thymelicus!' he called again, 'where are you?' Under the cherry trees he stopped, looking round: 'I know you're here! I saw you!' After a minute: 'Arminius, then. Don't hide!'

But the new name brought its answer from among the leaves: 'Here,' and a hand reached down for the jump.

The Roman, Priscus, spoke from the lower branch: 'Come home! What's the use of this? Father won't go on being angry.'

'And she?'

But the other reddened, speaking suddenly as if

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he were much the older: 'We won't talk about my sister, please.'

Thymelicus kicked out savagely, shaking the whole tree: 'Yes! But if it was my little snake of a cousin -'

'Italicus is only a boy; he hasn't done you any harm. And - Antonia's for neither of you. Weren't you told often enough yesterday? Why did you think it was possible, Thymelicus? - Arminius, then, if you won't answer to your own name!'

'Couldn't you see?'

'No. I tell you' - Priscus, trying to stay friends, laid a hand on the cherry bough that the other only looked past - 'I never thought of you as old enough for that. And besides: my sister! You might have known!'

'Might I? I've been brought up with her, brought up to think and feel Roman, ashamed of my father Arminius! What good do I get of it, Priscus? When I want to marry Antonia - Well, I know now. I'm only a savage. But I wish they'd told me before.'

'But how was I to think -' Only then Priscus felt his words go faltering down under the heavy stare of barbarian eyes, that weight of low, and now unpassionate, voice.

'Do I look so different from you? It wasn't that could frighten her so! I thought she might be kind to me. I thought she would make me all, all Roman. But that's over: and I'm glad. I'm not your equal, but only - only - the blood of Arminius!'

Silence fell on them both, scarcely stirred by the

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flashing of sun among the thick leaves. Priscus, hating it all, disturbed in all the roots of his young life, pressed down his face against the tree trunk, trying not to think. But Thymelicus looked out and out, and across the pale shafts of light that slanted delicately among the shadows of the pine-wood beyond them. North somewhere lay his father's kingdom, that grim place where no fruit trees blossomed over clear lawns. But this alone could be his now. For his old world here had turned unreal and cruel. Antonia – her face changing as he spoke – and then, when she screamed, unkind, ungentle – those hands whose softness he half knew already, crooked and clawing at him! He screwed his eyes up, it made him dizzy to think of the afterwards: things they had said to him. And Italicus at the back of the room, listening and grinning! Would it be the same for him when he was older? Priscus had said she was for neither of them. But could he trust a Roman now? Friendship was all a lie too. Oh, he might think himself lucky to be still alive, not to have been killed as a child, son of Rome's worst enemy! But Italicus – his father had been a traitor, he would get all the good of it: citizenship, honour, Antonia. . . . Horror, the cherry twigs danced green, green against blue sky as the bough shook under him. And where was Priscus now? Gone, he too, gone away: nothing left, only Italicus, his cousin, laughing at him, knowing what a fool he had been. And perhaps Antonia laughing too now!

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At mid-afternoon from the house that little wood of cherry trees looked utterly light and gay against the remote hollows of the pines. But Priscus knew better. He pointed, whispering: 'Go to him, Italicus! I can't help, but you might.' The boy pulled back from his hand: 'I don't want to, please! He doesn't like me!' 'No, but you must. After all — he's your cousin. Bring him back here; he won't hurt you.' Italicus looked for an excuse, but only saw that he was frightened. But that — he musn't say it, he looked appealingly at Priscus again, bit at two finger-nails and went.

Thymelicus was still in the cherry tree, aware that he was hungry now, and stiff and scratched, taking his only pleasure from that. The green world of leaves was all round him, the sick world of memories and old hopes weighting his heart. Feet sounded lightly on the grass, hesitating, seeking for him again. 'Let me alone!' he almost cried aloud, 'alone with these images!' Then, as nothing happened, he looked down, and there, just under him, that pink, round face, smiling, laughing at him still. His tunic tore on a knot as he jumped. No matter, see that face whiten and melt into sheer surprise and then terror, feel him go over all in a piece, stop him laughing ever any more! . . . But what had happened? He was fighting two, four, all the garden full of men! The more the better. He was alive at last.

Suddenly he heeled backwards, everything twisting over, faces, leaves, sky, leaves, faces, nothing.

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Priscus. 'What is it?' he whispered, weak and tired now; but Priscus, all horrified, turned away. He rolled half over, sick and aching, and saw them lift Italicus; the boy's pink face was like skim-milk now, with bright red dabs of blood, his mouth hung open; he looked very odd with his legs dangling like roots.

Now they were looking at him; he heard one whisper to another: 'Barbarian!' Then things began to break up and clear again, not just faces and blood, but people he knew, his cousin, hurt, broken, his doing! Oh, Barbarian, this was what came of it, once he had let it into his mind that he was different after all. 'Priscus!' he called, agonized, 'Priscus, what have I done? Have I killed anyone?'

Priscus came over, looking at him, judging, the young Roman: 'No one is killed. But Italicus is badly hurt.'

'I think I was mad. I didn't know. Priscus, are you sure it was I that did it?'

'Of course.' Priscus came nearer, frowning. 'You'd better get up; and come in. I must tell my father.'

They went away, looking at one another and then back at him, coldly, as at some beaten and powerless enemy; Priscus walked a little apart from the others with his hands behind his back twisting and un-twisting. The sun was sloping now, the shadows of the cherry trees deep and cool. Thymelicus lay for a long time in the grass, then slowly hoisted himself into the tree again, and sat there heavily, watching a

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cut on his arm ooze and then dry. He was stricken and chilled with the impossibility of going backwards in time, even for two days. He did not care to imagine what life would be now.

By and bye Priscus came out again and stood under the tree; for a time he did not seem to be able to speak. At last Thymelicus had to ask him: 'What did your father say?'

'He said – oh Thymelicus, I'm sorry, we've been friends so long! – but he said you weren't to stay here any longer.'

'Yes. Go on, Priscus.'

'He said you were to go south somewhere, to a place where it won't be like this.'

'Where – where they'll treat me as a barbarian?'

'I'm afraid so.'

Thymelicus held on very hard to his bough for a minute, and then asked again: 'What happened to Italicus?'

'He wasn't so badly hurt. Antonia is bathing his head.'

So that was what he had done! The two of them together now. Her little cool fingers wringing out the linen. Most likely he would never see her again.

Priscus peered up along the trunk, trying to see his face. 'Won't you come in?' he said, 'perhaps after all –'

But clearly there could be no after all, and by and bye Priscus went away, discouraged. Something in the grass was glittering steadily in the sunset, the

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warm light that streamed now under the lowest cherry boughs. After a time he slid down and went over to it. It was a knife that one of the gardeners must have dropped when they came to help Italicus. He picked it up and began to cut his name on the wood, digging in with the point through the smooth bark, getting closer and closer to it as the light dimmed. Quite suddenly it was dark and rather cold; he shivered and thought of going in, getting supper. And then realized all at once what it would be like if he did.

This was his father's fault: Arminius. He hated his father for hurting him. He leant against the tree for a little, with this hate satisfying him; but somewhere at the back of it he knew all the time that there was pride, gradually getting the better of the hate, transferring it, till again he found himself where he had been that morning, with it all turned against Italicus and Priscus and Rome. But now he was hopeless and his strength had been all used up in the fight. He began to wonder about that father of his. Arminius. He spoke the name softly aloud, as though he were calling someone to be kind to him, as Antonia never would be. It was his own name too, older than the other, the name his dead mother had called him.

It came to him then that the only people who loved him were the dead, and that all he wanted was love. And it became plain what he was choosing to do. There was nothing he minded leaving, nothing he

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wanted to finish – was there? But all this statement and question was in the outside of his mind. He could not attend, he was so steeped in a gathering blackness; he was welcoming the blackness into his heart.

But this at least would be Roman-fashion. He turned the knife sideways; he could see a little better now because the moon was rising. Those knights in Rome who had died, dead before the Emperor caught them. He would escape too: before they caught him. How was it? Right hand against left wrist pressed into the crook of a branch: quick, so. And grass under his head, little cold spikes brushing him. And cherry branches sweeping down, swinging, dizzily. Moon and leaves. Arminius.

MASCARET

CAUDEBEC-EN-CAUX

FIRST CENTURY A.D.

FOR a mile or two the forest would be all beech, then again pines; there was not much wind, but the pines creaked against one another; he could hear them plainly over the crunching horse hoofs and the low voices of his men behind, a little oppressed, as he was, by a whole day of riding under these bare and dripping trees, with the path twisting away ahead, and never coming clear of the soaked tangles of fallen boughs and holly and privet and thick broom. Even under the pines where there were no bushes growing, it was not much better: no one could see ten yards through the close, straight trunks. At last the guide, who had been trotting quietly in the mud beside Quintus' horse, looked up and stopped and pointed. 'What is it?' said Quintus slowly in Gallic, 'are we there?' The guide nodded: 'Loton – the town!' he said, then, excitedly, 'the big river!'

In front of them the path began to dip sharply into the valley through a thicket of young oaks, and peering through the leafless twigs Quintus could see, first, the huge curve of the flooded river, shining brown and grey like a great wet snake, then, nearer, the mud

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houses of Loton between the trees and the water, ridiculously small and feeble. Still, there it was at last, and he called back to his men, who sat up straight in their saddles and looked pleased. Then all at once the guide went down on his knees and began gabbling and making marks on the ground, barbarian-fashion. But Quintus waited patiently with loose reins till the man was finished; after a year in Gaul he was quite used to all sorts of curious customs and Gods.

The village chief, Nertorix, met them, and bade them welcome in very fair Latin, a tall middle-aged man, with a red cloak pinned on to look like a toga over his native wolf-skins. Quintus prided himself on the way he dealt with barbarians, and answered courteously, praising his town, the strong walls and clean streets and the straight wooden jetties along beside the river. But Nertorix shook his head: 'No, no, you must not think me such a fool! I have seen Lugudunon and Massilia too.' He sighed. 'And the middle sea – all so blue. But my fortune never took me as far as Rome.'

'That will be for another day,' said Quintus, pleasantly sympathetic, and relieved at finding Nertorix even thus much civilized, 'And at least you will find Father Tiber a mere baby beside this giant of yours.' He waved his hand towards the river, but saw at once that for some reason or other he had said the wrong thing, because the Gaul beside him stiffened and frowned and began to talk about billeting the men.

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All that week the bad weather went on, rain and cold, with the wintry trees pressing on them from one side and on the other the river lapping over the edges of their banked jetties. Here and there the draggled blackthorn made a patch of white, but the primroses were all beaten down, the violets could not open, and even the whin was nothing but lumps of dull, sunless yellow. Quintus thought sadly of his own Italian home, where earliest spring had always brought a sudden starring of colour to the hillsides, where already the sunshine would be warm enough to lie out in. Would April never force her way through these wet northern forests?

Still, it was not so bad in Nertorix's house, with big fires in the hall roaring and crackling and shutting out the sad watery noise of rain and river. The wine was not so bad, either, and one got to like their queer wild music after a time, and besides there were always the children tumbling in and out, airing their Latin on him, bringing him presents or tempting him to play touch-wood with them. He was fond of children and not too old himself to love a game: he wished he could buy two little bright-haired, blue-eyed Gauls to take home with him and liven the house up, laughing and racing like mad things! Only of course they wouldn't out of their own place — silly little flowers that wither when you try to transplant them. The children's mother came in and out, Mottu, a fair, shy woman, laden with necklaces. Her biggest boy was away at service with another chief up the river, but her hands

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were full enough with his two small brothers, and the three girls that Quintus never could quite tell apart. His favourite was the youngest boy, Brigon, six next month, always dragging about a hound puppy as big as himself, with a funny deep laugh you'd know a street away almost.

The orders would probably come in a day or two, perhaps by boat, thought Quintus; he used to go and watch the river sometimes, the racing dizzying surface stretched all away from his feet, with bubbles and eddies and long streaks. Sometimes it set upstream, sometimes down, but he never somehow happened to be there at the turn; that was odd, he thought, and after a time he began to suspect that he was being kept away on purpose.

It was going to be full moon – not that one ever saw what the moon was doing behind all these clouds: she might have been down on Latmos every night. But Quintus kept notice of things like new moons; it was useful if one was a soldier. And then he noticed how uneasy everyone was getting in Loton. People would be whispering together round the corners wherever he went, they all looked anxious, his host among them; but Nertorix would not admit there was anything wrong, and the children did not know, only they were a little frightened too, especially of going near the river. His centurion seemed almost the most anxious of all – in spite of its being a friendly place – and saw to it that the watches were well kept; he was an old soldier and could remember

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the rebellions in Cæsar's time, before Quintus was born. They were talking it over one day when all at once one of the Druids went by, glaring at them, his white robe flapping and stuck over with burrs and thorns from the wood, and a great mass of wet mistletoe in his arms. The centurion started and frowned: 'That looks bad!' and then, half excusing himself, 'It's that sick sort of green – I never could stand it somehow!'

That evening Nertorix was not there for supper, and none of the children seemed to be about. Quintus was rather bored and decided to go to bed early. As he got up, yawning, he suddenly saw his hostess, the pale Mottu, running with her arms up straight across the far end of the hall, and heard the thin echo of a cry, a little short screech like a bat, before she was gone. He rubbed his eyes, wondering for a minute if it was quite real.

He pulled the blanket over his ears, but even so he could still hear rain drumming on the roof above him and could not get to sleep at once. But by and bye he began to doze off, half dreaming. And woke with a start and saw Mottu come creeping in, guarding the flame of a little lamp that showed her white face and eyes wild and big and shining at him. He sat up, wide awake at once, and noticed that the rain had stopped. Mottu had her finger to her lips and when she spoke it was so low he could hardly hear. 'They came to-day,' she whispered; 'they took Brigon.' And then she shook so that the lamp dripped over her hands.

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'Who was it?' said Quintus. 'Where have they taken him?'

'They did,' said Mottu again; 'for the River – for the God.'

Quintus thought of the mistletoe, and shoved back the blankets, reaching quietly for his armour. 'We'll save him. Tell me where and when!'

'The jetty,' she answered. 'It comes to-night – soon.'

'What comes?' said Quintus, but the woman only shook her head, trembling, and when he asked her if this had been done before she seemed not to know, but suddenly pointed up with a last whisper before she went: 'Because of the rain.'

Quintus slipped out of the house and whistled twice. In three minutes the centurion was there and all his men, as quietly as possible. They waited to see if they had roused anyone, but when, after a little time, Quintus found himself still alone with his Romans, he began to explain. The centurion fidgeted and scratched his head and at last said: 'They won't be grateful, sir.' 'But Nertorix will be,' said Quintus, 'if we get his child away. And he's the one that matters.' 'I don't know,' the centurion muttered. 'They're queer folks, these savages. He may want it too; you can't tell.' 'He's not so bad as all that, though; why, I've lived with him for two weeks! Besides – I'm fond of that baby. Come on.' But all the same he wished he knew what was the It that came for the sacrifice.

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The clouds had cleared a little and there was a yellow patch where the moon was going to break through. The river looked immensely wide and as if there were some central blackness in the streaking water. The crowd of men on the bank was pretty quiet and all looking down-stream. Quintus whispered to the centurion, then gave the word.

Nobody was killed – that was good anyway. Quintus found himself a little bruised, but the Gauls had been so surprised that he had got through them in no time, and now his men were standing all round, facing outwards with swords drawn, and he was cutting the ropes as quickly as he could. The jetty sloped down here, for boats to be hauled out on land, and the child had been tied flat down to an iron ring on the slope. He was cold to touch and whimpered unhumanly. Quintus was so angry he could hardly see what he was doing – and the poor mother and father who did not know yet that the child was safe! Just then the moon came out, and he heard a rising gasp from the crowd and a sharp order from the centurion. And then he saw that the river beside him had stopped flowing: it stood still, waiting. He hacked at the last of the cords clumsily, because the child was struggling and he could not quiet it: ‘Brigon!’ he said, ‘Little Brigon! It’s me – don’t be frightened!’

And then there grew from down the river a little hissing noise, and he felt his reason slip horribly away from him, and knew there was a God coming quickly

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and looked up and saw the moonlight on the far side tipping the crest of a great dark wave that was running along the bank. As he snatched up the child, the whole surface of the river suddenly boiled up and rose at him, inky and roaring, caught him, ice-cold, his feet, his legs. . . . For long dark minutes he was choking and struggling in it, the mad water snatching at him, tugging to get him down into the river, under and drowned. A second wave knocked him spinning over and ground his face against the stones of the jetty. At last he caught at a ring and held with one hand, the other still tight round the child's wrist. The under-suck swept his body round and half over the jetty wall, then, marvellously, let go. One of his own men pulled him to his feet, more battered and hurt than he knew for the first moment. The child was alive and screaming.

He faced the crowd, the hate of the Druids who dared not attack, the savage, insane eyes of the worshippers, whose God had failed. Then Nertorix pushed through to the front, his face blotched horribly with fear and anger, and all at once Quintus saw that his centurion had been right and the chief had wanted it too. 'Our Gods are shamed,' said Nertorix harshly. 'The seed will rot. Summer will never come. The rain. The floods.' and then, gasping, 'Look at their answer!' A sweetish, horrible smell rose heavily from the wet slope, and glancing round a little, Quintus saw the wave had left something behind it, the swollen, hairless carcase of a sheep. And

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with a queer, terrified half-scream the crowd swayed nearer a step.

'Stand, men, they're coming!' shouted Quintus, his sword drawn ready. Darkness came on them as the moon slid back behind a cloud; the river was setting up now, rapidly and hard, rocking a very little and swirling fiercely under the jetty wall. The child crouched on the stones, wet and crying, and the Romans waited, all still, for the attack. Then, once more, suddenly and heavily, down came the rain.

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DORSET

THIRD CENTURY A.D.

ON a very fine spring morning three Romans, and half a dozen British servants with them, rode out of the south gate of Dorchester, heading for the sea. There was Petellius Jovinus, who had just returned the guards' salute; he was commander of the rather second-rate legion which was at the moment looking after the really quite well-established peace of this part of Britain. There was his ten-year-old son, Martius, who was talking very hard to one of the grooms. And there was his younger brother, Alfenius, who was in theory a lawyer and in practice the only efficient importer of snails west of the straits. Two years ago it had suddenly occurred to him to import rabbits too, from Spain. He was quite sure they would flourish here and be good for sport, even if there were never enough of them to make any difference to the food supply. But his elder brother was quite sure that the British climate would kill them all off in a few generations. 'After all, they came from the sands of Africa to begin with,' said Petellius, 'it was our soldiers who brought them into Spain, where they must shiver quite devilishly enough, poor crea-

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tures – but as to this! No, Alfenius, you've made a success of your snails: don't go flying in the face of the Gods with your rabbits.'

But Alfenius, being a hopeful person, was unconvinced. However, he changed the subject: 'Are there going to be any shows worth seeing this month?' he asked, nodding towards the high turf walls of the arena, backed with planks, against which the sweet-sellers could put up their booths.

Not really much of a place, of course, but still one did one's best to make things homely, and thought of the dear mother-land and shows one had seen with five hundred gladiators a side. . . . But then, the price of living in Rome! And besides it wasn't always safe, what with one emperor and another. Of course here in the back of beyond it was all terribly dull and nothing ever happened, or ever would, but that was perhaps just as well if one was a family man with growing children, and there was more society than you would think. . . . 'I hear there's going to be quite a nice bull-fight,' said the elder brother. 'You'll stay on, won't you? Of course I don't find these things as amusing as when I was your age, but still, one has to appear. The men like one to be – well, not too aloof.'

'Oh quite,' said Alfenius, 'and by the way, have you been having any trouble out west?'

Petellius laughed. 'The tribes have been as good as gold, bless them! A little police-work now and then, but not more than enough to keep the lads in a good

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temper. And nearer home everything's as quiet as can be. The natives are all taking Greek lessons! Why, I don't suppose there's so much as a pot of war-paint for thirty miles round.'

Here began a nice strip of turf by the road-side; it was too good to miss for a few minutes' canter. Then they slowed down to a walk, pleasantly cooled by the south wind, which, even thus far inland, seemed to have the smell of the sea in it. At least Martius thought so. They would come to the sea in time for him to get a look at all the ships in harbour. And it would be fun seeing mother and the babies. He had bought a lovely painted wood doll with his own money for the smallest sister, who was rather his special one. And if the new dairy wasn't finished yet he would help to lay the bricks. And when he came back the centurion of the second cohort, who had a dragon tattooed right across his chest, was going to teach him his drill properly.

At each side of the road the country looked pretty prosperous. Every mile or two there would be tracks, more or less deep in drying mud, and slit and pitted with thousands of sheep's hoof-marks, that dawdled away to some native village. One would see it across the fields, fenced round with turf and hurdles, the low roofs just showing over the top; or there might be a chief's house, built square and Roman fashion, with brick walls enclosing a space for the rest of the community; or else it would be just a trail of smoke still or drifting over a hump of the downs. Where the

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hills were at all steep they were terraced carefully for grain, barley mostly. There were orchards and a few trimmed vines still scarcely budding; there was grazing land with mixed herds, sheep and cattle and a few horses, and a goose or two straying round the outside, and a dozen children racing to keep them together; and there were the big common fields, half green with the young barley or clover, and half fallow. A rather bigger path went off now to the right, not of course paved or straight like a proper road, but still something you could have marched along. It led towards a very odd-looking, large, flattish hill with earthworks very plain all round it. Alfenius stared at it: 'What's that?'

'Oh,' said his brother, 'that's Dunium, the biggest native town in these parts. Dunium means town, you know.'

'I don't think I've ever seen a bigger one. Would they mind if one looked in, Petellius?'

But Petellius seemed not to care for the idea. 'They're very touchy,' he said. 'Better not, I think.'

'Oh why?' said Martius. 'Father, you know they never mind! You can give the Chief some money or ask him to supper, can't you?' And he turned his pony up the road.

'If things are as peaceful as you say,' said Alfenius, 'I can't see the harm. And surely this town is in your district?'

'They're so odd about Dunium,' said Petellius, 'and the Chief never seems to come to town. We try to

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get them, you know, to come to the shows when there's anything on, not that they care much for acting – though they've a near for a good tune, and pick it up and stick their own ridiculous words on to it – but anything livelier. Better for them, you know, than the things they're apt to do at New Year and Midsummer. One tries to put all that down, but there are still a surprising amount of Druids wandering about, even here – though the Northern commands are much worse. But I've never so much as spoken to Festydd of Dunium: there's always some excuse.'

However, by now they were off the high road. The nearer they got to Dunium, the more they smelt sheep and the more larks kept rising and falling out of the turf all round them. But the only thing they passed on the road was a woman with a tucked-up apron full of roots, who crouched down hastily to hide her bare legs from the Romans.

The ground rose towards the gateway, which was barred with wicker hurdles in the gap of a steep bank. One could not very well see where one was going, because there was another earth wall inside, a good deal higher than the outside ones, and very steep, with rather a lot of daisies in the turf of it. A man with blue, stupid eyes poked his head over the edge at one side. After a minute's argument with the head groom he climbed down, undid the withy knots and pulled a hurdle half-way back. They rode in, one by one. It was not obvious which way to turn, but the man guided them through narrow openings in the earth-

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works where a rider's feet might scrape against both sides and perhaps rub loose a few small flints that had worn half through the chalk and grass. One had to get past the three main rings of built and rammed earth, sixty feet high, that seemed to go all round the town, and here at the gateway they overlapped and twisted and made queer cool passages. Martius kept rather close to his father and uncle, who were talking about snails again and the respective difficulties of breeding and shipping them. He looked up at the top of the earthworks rather often, and was extremely glad there were no faces peering over the edge, no stupid blue eyes watching for the best place to poke a spear into one's ribs – or even worse faces one could think of quite easily – And how terribly exciting it would have been in the old days, before the Britons were beaten, if one was marching in with one's own splendid legion instead of half a dozen rotten grooms who'd run away if a sheep baaed at them! And one's great black stallion would be prancing and trampling on bodies, and snorting – he patted his pony's neck as they went through another gap – but he supposed one would really do best to have a tower on wheels to go round the place and shoot over and down into the ditches, two towers probably. And one could mine?

Another steepish slope took them up through the last gap. 'But where's the town?' said Martius. There was certainly less town than one would have expected, and the guide seemed to have lost interest in taking

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them any further. There were lots of small turf walls, and squares hurdled off for the ewes with lambs, and a few thatched huts that looked more like byres than the kind of house any self-respecting South Briton would live in nowadays. However there was one decent building, at any rate; they saw it clearer in a moment through a straight gap in the sheep walls. It was stone-built and square, with a proper tile roof and a good many out-buildings, and there were fruit trees nicely lined up in front. The guide's grunt admitted that it was the Chief's house.

'Well,' said Petellius, puffing, 'shall we pay our call? Or shall we go back? There's not much to see!'

'Oh come along, father!' said Martius.

And Alfenius said too: 'Yes, let's rout out the Chief. It's an odd place, you know. One expects streets of houses and one finds nothing but sheep. I can't make it out.'

Petellius was quite pleased. It was really a compliment to him as a host from his younger brother, who was almost always polite, but not always, he felt, really interested in the affairs of the Command.

As they got nearer the Chief's house the excellent impression rather faded. One side of it seemed to have been plastered at one time, but most of the plaster had come down and some one had been painting those annoying Druid signs in red on the pieces that were left. The apple trees were in a bad state too, unpruned for years, with moss beards and nasty lumps of mistletoe on them. They dismounted,

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and a woman let them into the hall, which was dark and smelt of sheep; Martius burst into a fit of giggles because he had found a great fat ewe panting in one corner behind a pile of sacks, and by and bye she floundered up and burst out of the house behind them. 'I suppose the Chief's got wool on him too!' he said, but his father shut him up sharply, because one never knew nowadays whether the natives couldn't understand Latin.

The woman beckoned them on into another room of the house with a brick floor and woven stuff on the walls. The Chief was standing here, turning a little away from them with his hands twisted together. He wore sheepskin breeches and coat, not even a pretence at a toga. He kept in the farthest and darkest part of the room; there were bundles of tallies piled high against the walls everywhere. Petellius spoke in British to him, very slowly and soothingly, asking for leave to look at his fine town. But unexpectedly the man shook his head. Petellius, as surprised as he looked, urged with some force that the Chief should reconsider his decision, suggested that in return he should come to Dorchester one day, hinted that it was impolitic, and found in his own mind that the first mild curiosity about Dunium was turning to suspicion. But Festydd the Briton backed away from him, frowning, and suddenly said: 'I shall call the dogs!'

The two Romans glanced at one another and the boy behind quivered from his toes up with

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excitement. 'My good friend,' said Alfenius, 'do you realize who has been speaking to you? Try and be reasonable. We are not going to hurt your town. What are you afraid of?'

'There is nothing here for you!' said the Briton, red in the face and swinging his hands about. 'We do you no harm – why should you come? This is Mai Dun and it does not choose to have strangers in it!'

'Amazing, these barbarians!' said Petellius under his breath to his brother.

But Alfenius had suddenly gone quite close to the Chief, he spoke in Latin, loud and sharp with surprise: 'Fastidius! You're Fastidius!'

The Chief blinked and said nothing for a moment or two, then in the civilized tongue, but weakly and haltingly: 'I remember you. But now I am Festydd again. You should go away.'

'By Bacchus, no!' said the Roman, 'Festydd or Fastidius, you've won too much good money off me cock-fighting in London to send me packing the moment we meet again!'

Festydd looked round quickly, as if he hoped a hole might open for him, then shouted to the woman who was still hanging about in the doorway behind to bring drink. 'I was lucky sometimes,' he said jumpily, and came half a pace nearer. They could smell the unwashed sheep-skins he wore, greyish and greasy, and see the gold twisted ring he wore on his chest heave up and down. The woman brought wooden cups and mead in a copper-bound jug.

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Festydd poured it out, scummy and sticky. 'Drink round!' he said, and they all drank, Martius making rather a face because it was fuller of odd herb tastes than even the most native mead he had ever come across.

'And now we shall see the town?' said Alfenius.

The man's eyes grew filmed with sulkiness. 'I have no town,' he said, 'it is all sheep! Sheep – if you choose to look at sheep – I will keep the dogs off.' He went past them into the hall, and so to the doorway and whistled. Five shaggy grey dogs, rather like sensible sheep themselves, came bounding up. He stooped and whispered to them.

The Romans followed him. 'You have a fine house here,' said Petellius, distinctly relieved at the way things were turning out.

'It was when I built it,' said Festydd; 'there was a bath and a red marble pillar, and pictures of hunting on the floor and pictures of women on the walls.' He looked round as if he expected them to be there still. The walls were damp and just splotched with colour in places, the black and red lasting longest, and there was some coarse broken mosaic to be seen round the edges of the floor. Perhaps there was more under the hard earth and dirt and caked litter they were standing on.

Suddenly he turned and bolted back into his room, leaving the Romans standing in the doorway. 'I should suspect the sheep of taking more baths than he does now!' said Alfenius.

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'They've eaten the red marble pillar anyway!' said Martius, now at last able to giggle unrepressed.

'How extraordinary meeting him,' said Alfenius again, 'after ten years. I hardly recognized him, he's changed so. You wouldn't think it, but he used to be quite a civilized being; but once they get into the hands of the Druids — that's what I suspect here — they go all to pieces like this. And he had as nice a lot of cocks as I've ever seen! Still, here we are.'

They stared all round them. Up here on the flat top of the hill there was an amazingly clear, light wind dancing round their heads. They walked all along the southern edge, looking out across-country for miles. In the distance there was a light spring haze; Martius said he could see over to the sea, but the others were doubtful. And first there was the turf wall they were walking along, broad and flat-topped and sweet-smelling, eight feet high on the inside, and the outside dropping sharply down, down, to a ditch so deep and steep-sided one did not like to think of stumbling into it, still less of having sliding races; not even the youngest of the grooms seemed to take to the suggestion. The ditch went straight along, half full of shadow; at its other side went up another earthwork, nearly as high as the hill itself; and another ditch and another earthwork; three rings unbroken all the way round, immensely steep and formidable. Martius and his uncle were discussing how to take the hill — if one had a couple of legions, say, and Alfenius was also thinking that it would be

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possible to naturalize his rabbits on these south slopes. It would almost certainly be warm enough. And if one forbade the natives to kill them for a few years, something might be made of it.

'I suppose there really used to be great battles here?' said Martius, hoping so.

'Not since the conquest,' said his father.

'But in the old days – I expect the Britons fought one another; of course it would be different if one hadn't proper weapons. If I was attacking I should invent a special sort of tower –'

'It would take two thousand men to hold this,' said his uncle, coming back from the rabbits.

'I wonder where they lived?'

'And how they got water; that stream's much too far, they could never keep communication with it.'

'There's this lovely pond, uncle.'

Alfenius looked over his shoulder with a Roman contempt for dew ponds: 'Don't tell me you'd water a thousand men from that every day! Let alone their beasts. But why aren't there houses? Why isn't this a town?'

'It's very odd indeed,' said Petellius, suddenly feeling acutely responsible for his own command, hitching the cloak straight on his solid shoulders; 'your dirty friend Fastidius called it Mai Dun: that means a strong town. And this is all there is! It can't have been used that way; there's no trace of its ever having held that number of men. And yet these great ditches and battlements all round! They must have

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taken generations to build for the barbarians. And now one can't think of it with anything but sheep! But what's it all for, Alfenius?

'Couldn't it have been against wolves? One hears they used to be as bad here in the old days as they are now up north.'

'That doesn't seem quite right either – not all this!'

The two brothers stopped, looking down over the western end where the three concentric rings of ditch and rampart ran together again and turned and overlapped into another fantastic maze of entrance. By this time they had both worked up into a terrifically serious interest that merely ignored Martius' legions and a new and very ingenious mining scheme; that was the bother about grown-ups.

A little way off, sitting on the wall with the wind blowing her hair about, there was a small girl; at first Martius was inclined to go on past her with his nose in the air; these dirty, stupid little sheep-girls never had anything to say. However, when he got nearer he found she was pretty, and also had a dangling flat gold thing with circles on it hung round her neck. Also she threw a small stone at him and said: 'Who are you?'

He said, very grandly: 'I'm Martius Jovinus, son of the Commander. We've come from Dorchester.'

'Oh,' said the little girl, 'I'm Ygerne, and I live here. Dorchester is down there,' she pointed negligently over her shoulder towards the north-east.

'No!' said Martius, 'at least it is, but it's not down

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anywhere! It's a splendid city with a garrison of soldiers that could simply come and eat you up!

Ygerne tucked her feet under her. 'It may be a nice little town, but it's not on a great hill like this, straight under the sun and the stars and the lightning. This is Mai Dun.'

'You all say it's Mai Dun, but it's not a town at all — it's just a great sheep-pen!'

Ygerne laughed. 'You don't know why it's called Mai Dun! I do.'

Martius, who had picked up plenty of stray native ideas from the grooms, said scornfully: 'I suppose there's some silly prophecy. I don't believe in Druids. They just play tricks on stupid, ignorant people who don't know any better!'

'There is a prophecy,' said Ygerne, and then stood up rather slowly. 'I know a little myself,' she said. 'Shall I put a spell on you?'

Martius found his eyes fixed on the gold circles that hung at her breast; in a moment they would begin to go round; he shook himself violently. 'There isn't time to-day,' he said, 'and anyhow you can't! Tell me the prophecy instead.'

'Well I will,' she said. 'I expect it will frighten you!'

'Not it!' said Martius stoutly.

She did not move for a minute, seemed just to be gathering herself up into a thing with eyes and a terrible new sharp voice. She was going to speak almost at once. And then suddenly she fell away,

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back to a little sheep-girl, an ignorant little native who had never been to Dorchester, and his uncle behind him was speaking in his own language: 'Come on, Martius, it's time we got back to the road.' And then he patted the little girl on the head and gave her a small silver coin. Martius half expected her to turn it into a snake or something, but she just bobbed a curtsy and kept it and said nothing. And the three Romans went back to the Roman road.

'She was going to tell me a prophecy about the town,' said Martius.

'That would have been an extra tuppence!' said his uncle. 'Pretty little thing, too. But I wish I could make out about the place.'

'Perhaps she'd have told us.'

But the uncle did not attend; he was becoming more and more convinced of the possibilities of rabbits in the Southern command.

After a few miles they had lunch, and Martius caught a new sort of butterfly, and then they rode on again. By and bye the road forked, one goodish by-road that would scarcely take them out of their way going off to the left. 'Oh father!' said Martius. 'Do - do let's go by the wishing well! Uncle hasn't seen it, and I'm sure he'd like a wish.' And that was all right, because it was a lovely day and really no hurry.

There was quite a good-sized village round the wishing well, and two or three girls who tried for Alfenius first, but, failing him, began some lively conversations with the grooms, which were sup-

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pressed at once, rather to Martius' annoyance, because it really was time they stopped treating him like a baby! However, they all dismounted for the well itself, which was a few paces off the road. It was a good sight, because the stone-laid path just suddenly came to an end, and there was a great clear mass of spring-cool water pouring and bursting out at their feet, making a wide grown-up river at once. 'And then, in a few miles, it's down to the sea,' said Martius, 'just like this! It's born without ever being a baby. Look, you can see the springs, those lovely round burst-ups in the middle of the water. You stand on this stone and you dip your cup into the middle like this, and you stand with your back to the water and drink three times and wish hard.' They all drank in a solemn and proper silence, and left a small offering, in theory for the local shrine, with the local ladies. And so back to the horses. 'I've often been here!' said Martius, 'and it almost always comes true.'

'I hope it does,' said Alfenius, 'because I wished I could find out about Dunium, and I really want to know!'

'Oh uncle, you silly!' said the boy, really cross at this typically grown-up piece of stupidity. 'Why did you tell? You'll never know now! I did think you'd know enough not to say your wish!'

'Oh,' said Alfenius laughing, 'I'd forgotten one wasn't allowed to say! How very annoying! And I suppose we shall never hear what yours was.'

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'Not till it comes true.' And Martius shut his mouth grimly.

Another turn would bring them in sight of the villa; probably mother would be looking out for them. They brisked up to a trot. Suddenly Petellius produced a most interesting remark. He said: 'When we're back in town, I suppose you'll say you're old enough to go to the bull-fight, what?'

'Oh father!' said Martius, 'that was my wish! You see – you see it comes true if one doesn't tell till it does! Oh uncle, I do wish you hadn't told, I should have liked to know about Mai Dun too, and now we never shall!'

LÆTA

ROME

A.D. 304 – A.D. 1923

CAN I come? Can I come? Will you let me? The priests are singing, ah-so, ah-so, they make a sound in your head, singing up and down, ah-so, ah-so, like the noise that comes in your head when the smoke is thick, choking you. Before – before the fire – you get that dinning, singing, all through your body. Can I come? It is making a noise in your head like it made in mine – last time. Oh stranger, I am so unhappy!

You are not afraid, are you? There is nothing to be afraid of. I am only a little ghost, I can't hurt you. I would never have hurt you when I was alive: why should I now? Please let me come! You need not think it is me, say it is only your own story-telling, you to yourself, and the noise the priests make singing ah-so, ah-so, ah-so. It makes you feel stiff and your hands tingle. But I will not hurt you, nor stay long, stranger – friend! Oh, you will let me come!

You know now, I am quite young, younger than you. But you don't know if I am a boy or a girl. Oh, you have guessed wrong! Of course I was a girl! But then I was never quite grown-up. I wanted to be, I wanted to be a woman like you are; but it all

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happened first and I never had the chance. Surely you know what it was? Look in that red book: it tells all about the church – twenty-four loads of martyrs' bones under the altar. Mine are there too. No, the others are not unhappy like I am, they have got away, they are not here any longer; but they were real martyrs and I wasn't – though I was burnt. . . . Please don't get angry with me for being a Christian martyr! I chose you because you looked as if you wouldn't mind a ghost, and the real Christians do. Let me tell you what happened – you won't mind then. And I might go to sleep afterwards. You see, you are sorry for me already. And truly I think you may be.

I can see and feel through you now: I do like that! Yes, let us go out. Oh how lovely the sun is! It was so dark in there. Rome is different, isn't it? There used to be beautiful gardens here; one peeped through sometimes and saw the ladies and gentlemen walking in them. Where are we going now?

Oh! Who is that tall, dark gentleman beside us? Take care, he is touching you! Is he your husband? I like him; it must be nice to be married. I wanted to be.

My name is Læta, and I was born here in Rome. Can you hear me? There is such a noise in the street. My father and mother were poor. Oh no, not slaves! I think perhaps my father's grandfather might have been, but we were always respectable. Father kept a little fish shop but it never paid very well. I expect

it was the neighbourhood; he always hoped we'd be able to move to somewhere better. But we used to make the best of it; after all it doesn't take much to feed three. I used to go out and sell flowers in the big square and never came back without a little money. Oh no, no! How can you think that of me? I never let anyone be rude to me even; I just walked away, and if they followed me I went home, or to one of the Brothers. I made the money because I was clever with my fingers; I made garlands and there were two or three very nice families who always came to me when they were giving a party.

That was how I met Lucius. Oh, don't you know, don't you feel? Please be kind to me, it is so difficult to tell! He loved me, but of course he couldn't offer to marry me; he was a rich gentleman and we weren't even real citizens. I tried not to see him after that; it hurt me too. He was young, with a little stoop and a smile which didn't come often, but when it did it lighted his whole face. He was gentle and kind to me always; but I couldn't, could I? So it went on for nearly a year.

Where are you taking me? To sit at a little table and eat cold things like snow! How nice they are. Perhaps Lucius had things to eat like this sometimes. The sun has been burning your skin, because you come from the north; it will not do that now I am here; I like the sun, it makes the flowers grow.

Ah, what have you seen, why are you afraid? — oh, it is I who am afraid! That man — oh, but he can't be

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here still after sixteen hundred years! No, it was only because he was lame too, and had the same kind of dreadful lips. There, it is all right, isn't it? Go on eating, talk to your husband, don't think about me. I will tell you more soon.

It was almost the end of the year that the lame man came. He wanted me too. But not like Lucius. He used to come limping round corners. Oh, I don't want to talk about him and I won't say his name! I won't. He might come. But you'll keep me safe. I used to be safe then, because of the Church. It was all round us, all the time, like – like being in love. I hoped Lucius would come too one day, I used to tell him about it in that first year, when it was still safe to talk about it aloud, before everyone said we were so wicked; he wasn't jealous, he was glad for me to have the other love. You see, it was the same: he and I standing by the river, quite quiet, holding hands, or all of us, Brothers and Sisters, praying and singing together and very happy. Both ways it was love, and I didn't want it ever to be different. Only between times – there was the sun and my flowers, and people I saw in the street with monkeys and birds in cages or pretty beads to sell: and then he'd come round the corner, that lame man, and breathe close to my face!

But mostly I was happy, and I felt as if some day, when I was older, it would be better still. And then they told the Emperor about us. I don't know why they were so cruel. People we knew were taken away

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suddenly and afterwards we used to hear what had happened. The Emperor's soldiers hurt them dreadfully and then they died. And then they got the Reward, and now they are all together in heaven and all the pain is quite gone and forgotten; they must be there, for, if they aren't, why should I be left alone now? Only, it was so good in the Church when we were all alive and together; I didn't want anything else. Except Lucius some day. Oh, why couldn't they leave us alone when we were so happy!

But we had to be secret then, and I do hate secrets. I like to say aloud what I'm thinking, or sing about it, out in the open. I hated darkness, even when the others were all there, even when the altar was all alight and lovely with candles; one couldn't get near enough. Until I was quite near I was always frightened. Most of the men weren't frightened, they were proud and glad somehow: father was. And so was mother; she'd got something that, you see, I hadn't got. Oh no, I don't mean the Light; I had that too then, at least I think I had. No, I mean — well, she had father and I hadn't anyone.

Lucius tried to get me to come away; he saw I was frightened, and he was frightened for me. He told me about a farm of his in the country, that was all covered with roses and jasmine and quite safe; he would come and see me there. So I said I could never see him again — I had to, hadn't I? — but all the same I used sometimes to think about the farm and the roses, and sun in the pink almond trees. I used to

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find that in my mind during prayers. And sometimes – sometimes I thought of Lucius peering down and smiling at me from under an arch of white roses – and I thought of a cradle once: among the flowers. Oh, was it very bad of me? But of course I never told him that, and I never told mother or anyone: it would have been dreadful for them to know my heart was like that. But I may tell you, mayn't I? It was all a very long time ago, and now I am only a poor ghost who can't have any babies. And Lucius must be dead too, though I never can see that quite; but I pray – oh I do pray he saw the Light first, and now he is in heaven with the others, even if I never see him again. You think he is? Oh, that is so kind of you! But oh – oh, don't say you think I shall ever get there too. Please don't. It only hurts me to think it might have happened. Because I know – oh I know it's too late for any hope now.

You are going back to your inn. You are afraid of the cold when the sun sets. Ah, I didn't like the cold either. And it is so cold under the altar where my bones are. But I like it when the shops begin to light lamps and everything inside gets softer and redder. It used to make nice lights on the fish in father's shop and people used to buy going home to supper. I would look out for the lamp every evening coming back from the market with my money in a little striped bag, after I'd sold the last of my flowers. Then one evening when I got to the end of the street and looked down, it wasn't there.

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One of the neighbours' wives ran out and caught hold of me; she pulled me in behind their door and whispered that the soldiers had come and taken father and mother, and I musn't dare go home. She was nice and kind to me; she was a Believer in secret, because her husband wouldn't often let her come to us. They sold vegetables. The shutters were up, so we knelt down behind the sacks of carrots and onions, and prayed, and I stopped crying and trembling so much. She whispered: 'You must hide, Læta! They'll come back and catch you if you don't, all those big, awful, ugly soldiers!' She told me what they did to girls sometimes – oh, I can't even say it! So I saw I couldn't go home to wait all alone for that, and she couldn't hide me because of her husband. I didn't know where to go; it seemed dreadful even to think of the streets again when they might come bursting on one anywhere. I just couldn't face it. So we prayed again till we heard her husband in the back room. Then suddenly it seemed to me that I must go to the Brothers, go to the Church and be with them, under God's hand, and then I would know that, whatever came, it was meant – not just an accident for me alone. I said so, and while I said it I was not at all afraid of the streets between me and the House with the Cellar, where was the way in. She knelt in front of me and said: 'Bless me, Læta.' There was a smell of apples and carrots and green country things, and I laid my hands on her head, as I had so often had it done to me, and the blessing went down to her

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through my finger-tips, as water goes down a fountain pipe. I went out of her shop and along the streets with the gentle light coming out from half-shut windows and under doors, and I was not afraid of the Emperor's soldiers. There was the House with the Cellar on ahead, and with the Brothers peace and danger. Because — oh, I am right, aren't I? — peace is a thing like love that one can't have just when one wants: it comes to one suddenly when one isn't thinking of it. But I knew it would be there in the Church hovering like a bright light over swords.

There was an archway on my right before I came to the House. Two houses leant together with plaster cracking off them, and someone had made this archway of beams between. In the daytime there were sometimes two poor cripples who sat begging, and I always gave them a little; but at night, even when I was with father, I used to want to hurry past and not look, because I might just see the things that used to happen up the alley, and I might want to look again. That would have been the other sort of danger that there is no peace in. So I got close to the archway, but I wasn't thinking of all that then, I had my eyes on the door of the House, and I was just passing the archway —

Oh! We have come to the inn where you live. What a funny stone beast that is in front of it! Now you must read all those letters — how clever of you to be able to read! — and have your supper in this

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nice light place, and you must forget about me for a little. I will keep quite quiet.

Now, may I go on telling you? It was about that dark archway that always seemed to breathe sour on one. I was just going past when the lame man stepped out and grinned at me, and held up a lamp, and licked his lips. His upper lip was cracked and his teeth were dirty; I couldn't see anything in the world except his mouth. I couldn't see past him to the House with the Cellar. I stood and felt sick because I knew he was going to touch me. And so he did. He took hold of my arm — *there*, just above the wrist. He said: 'You had better not go there, little Læta. The soldiers are coming at midnight.'

And I knew I couldn't go on then; I couldn't wait there knowing it was certain! Could I? I had got frightened of the streets again. I tried to get away from them, into the archway, even if it meant brushing past him, close past his face. He put both arms round me and his hard legs round my legs, and kissed me in the archway; he kissed my mouth with his dreadful wet mouth. I couldn't move and he got closer and hotter, and the plaster of the house flaked off where I squeezed into it and fell tickling down my neck like spiders. Then he let me go, but I couldn't stir, I couldn't pray, I could only think of Lucius and wish he would come and take me away. But of course he didn't. He was safe at home in his big clean house, just finishing supper and thinking what he was going to read that evening, I expect.

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The lame man still held my wrist, though I hadn't even tried to get away. He told me what to do. I was to go out of Rome by the Aurelian Gate and walk on till a man with a donkey came out from behind one of the tombs, and I was to mount and go on till we came to an inn near the seashore. I was to stay there and say nothing. He said it all in a low voice but quite ordinarily. Then he turned me round and gave me a little push, and I began walking. I got to the Aurelian Gate and walked out along the road, and no one spoke to me. The sky got a terrible yellow light into it at one side, till the moon rose, very big. The man with the donkey came out from behind the tomb and I mounted, and he said nothing either. We went on all that night for a long, long way; there were mountains on one side and the sea on the other with the full moon over it; long waves kept coming in like sideways snakes with the moonshine on their backs, and hissing at me. I was very tired; I nearly fell off the donkey. We came to a small inn made of black planks standing by itself close to the sea. Dawn was beginning and I could see there was a harbour farther along with boats pulled up on the shore, but no one about. The man knocked for a long time and at last they opened the door and took me to a room under the roof with a bed and blankets. I lay down and slept.

Why did I go? Why did I do that? Oh, you are angry with me! But I didn't know — oh I had to! There was nobody else to tell me what to do, and I

did try to pray when I was on the donkey, but the noise of the sea and that white, terrible moonlight seemed to hold me down. Besides, you've never seen the lame man.

But I slept. I slept for long, dead hours, and didn't think of father and mother or the Brothers at all. I felt safe from the ugly soldiers, anyhow. That wasn't the kind of safety I had been looking for, but I could sleep on it for the moment. Now you must sleep too. How nice it must be to go to bed with your husband.

How bright the morning is! Why are you sad? Because of me? Oh no, don't be, I like being with you, and I am so light, surely so light to haunt you! What are you going to do? Oh, I shall love to look at Rome again! And to-night you are to go away in a train, you say, back to your own house and your own babies. Oh no, I won't come with you. What a lot of churches there are in Rome now! If we had known how many there were going to be, perhaps people wouldn't have been so faithful – not to death. It wouldn't have seemed so important. We didn't know. And there might have been so much less pain!

Well, I woke up in the afternoon at the inn, and prayed, and tried to talk to the inn people, but they wouldn't say anything. The donkey man was gone. I only had a very little money with me, just what I had made by selling my flowers the day before; but I thought perhaps it would be provided. Once I tried to thank God for deliverance, but when I got on to my knees it didn't seem like that. It was an ugly

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country, just dull, straight vineyards all round and the empty, dusty plain; and at the other side the sea heaving and twisting slowly and waiting for the moon. Sometimes I longed for that day to end, and sometimes I could not bear that darkness should come again with all its power. They gave me bread and cheese for supper.

When I was finishing the lame man came in. He sat on the bench opposite me and began talking in a low voice but so that I could hear. He told me what was being done to the Brothers even while we were sitting there, sometimes in the open, and sometimes shut away in dark holes under the streets. He talked about fire and racks and a wheel with spikes that kept on turning. He told me just what happened. He wouldn't stop for a moment and I couldn't speak. I wanted to ask about my mother, and he seemed to know: he went on to tell me more about what happened to the women. And God did nothing.

He told me to come over and sit by him, and I went, as well as I could for shaking. He began to stroke my face and neck, saying he would save me from it all. I don't know how long that went on, but suddenly he was very close, and again I thought of Lucius, and I jumped up and ran to my room and shoved the bolt across; and bolted the shutters too and stood quite, quite still. He came slowly down the passage, limping, and tried my door. He must have stayed there more than an hour, because after a time I saw the thin edge

of moonlight under the shutter. Most of the time he was saying that unless I let him in he would tell the soldiers to come for me, and it would be worse than if I had been caught with the others; he said just how much worse it would be; he told me all over again about racks and whips and the wheel; he told me about the slow fire. And sometimes he said he wouldn't hurt me if I did let him in. And sometimes he begged and cried and spoke to me horribly, wickedly, about my poor body, so that I tried not to listen. And sometimes he just waited as if he knew I was going to unbolt the door, so that I nearly did. But I knew that would be worse even than making the sacrifice to the Emperor and the false gods that are many forms of the one Evil. Was I right? Was I right?

After a time he went round to the outside and tried the shutters. He said he would go back to Rome and tell the soldiers if I did not open before he counted a hundred. So he counted and I listened, close up to the shutters, and I felt as if the flames were licking nearer and the spiked wheel rolling over towards me. But at least I didn't open. I heard him limping away, muttering, breaking up the heavy moonshine. I waited for another space of time — I don't know how long — and then I slid back the bolt. I thought that somehow, somehow, I could get to Lucius. I thought God would guide me. But when I got to the room where supper had been, the master of the inn was there, saying I must pay him. I asked how much. It was

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twice what I had and more than it should have been, anyhow. When I emptied my purse on the table he took what there was and then said I should stay till either I had paid or someone had paid for me. He looked at me so that I knew it was no use begging him, with the hard greedy eyes of the heathen who do not know Mercy among their gods. So I went back to my room and he called after me that it was no use trying the window. So I sat on the edge of the bed and waited till morning, and wished it were all over.

Oh, do you still believe me? And do you pity me? I thought no one would ever pity me: the Brothers would know I had deserted them, and Lucius would never know at all. I didn't think of you. Where are you going now? Oh, this is a place I know! Why have they let it get so dirty and broken? Sometimes I sold flowers in the shade here, me and my basket. Oh, what is the matter? Why are you shaking so? — what is it? Surely there's nothing here to frighten *you*? You're safe and happy. . . . Ah, I know, I know what it is: not anything dreadful, only wood smoke. You like it really. You'll like it again when I'm gone, I promise you. Ah, stop trembling, dear — your husband thinks you are tired. How lovely to have someone to mind whether you are tired or not!

I must tell you what happened after it was day. I heard people riding up and then I heard the lame man talking to someone. So I tidied my hair and put

my dress straight, and tried very hard to know what it was like not being hurt, so as to be able to remember it later. They came in and took me. That wasn't quite as bad as I'd thought, because they kept the lame man off, though he rode beside us, and whenever I looked he was grinning at me; I suppose he got a reward for telling them. They weren't unkind really, only I hated being touched. And I knew it was only the beginning.

They took me to prison. The gaoler chained my hands and said he hoped I was going to be sensible. I knew what he meant, of course; but I think he was really quite a kind man. I was taken down a stone passage that smelt very nasty; but one got used to the prison smells. I was put into a big room with one barred window high up; there were some other women there, and almost at once I saw some of the Sisters among them. They took me over to their corner and we kissed one another, but they didn't ask many questions, and I was glad of that. The rest were street women who'd been caught drunk or thieving; most of them were horrid to us because we tried to keep clean and combed our hair and wouldn't play dice with them.

It was all dark and queer at first, and I didn't see into all the corners. In one of them there was a lady who had been a Witness already; she was a widow and quite rich, with a house and garden of her own; I'd been in the garden once — there was a fountain and white irises. So it must have been even worse for her

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than the rest of us. After I'd had a rest they took me to see her. She was lying on a heap of straw, and at first I could only look at her eyes that seemed very big. Then I knelt to kiss her hand and I saw the marks on her wrists and the way her arms lay crooked. She smiled a little at me and whispered: 'Don't be frightened, Læta. I told these kind people not to try and put me right again. It's only for such a little time, it's not worth while. And, Læta, I thought of Him all the time, and I hardly cried at all.' Someone else said: 'He will give us all strength!' And just for a moment they seemed wonderfully happy and brave. But I couldn't speak.

After that I managed to ask about father and mother – I hadn't dared before. They didn't know, and if they guessed they didn't say so to me. They were all kind – too kind. It might have been better if they had been harder to me. We sang a great deal and sometimes then I did get strength; it made me feel there were more of us. And for a day or two nothing happened.

Then they took away the lady who had Witnessed, on a stretcher because she couldn't walk; she never came back. After that every day they took one or two more. Sometimes they did come back and that was almost worse – to see them afterwards. Of course they wanted to tell what had happened: it was the only earthly thing left them to tell. And once or twice it made me feel proud and excited that anyone – most of all women, ordinary women like me – could be

like that. But mostly it was terrible. You see, sometimes they just couldn't bear it: they weren't all given Help. Then they were just broken to bits, and it was awful going near them or trying to be kind and useful, as one had to. When there were fewer of us left, the street women came sidling up to tell us – and me usually – all about it all over again in case we weren't remembering!

But all the same there were times one could be brave. Sometimes they let us and the Brothers meet. I don't know why. Perhaps some gaoler was kind. There were not many of them, but such as there were had got strength. There was my old uncle, father's brother. He spoke like a prophet and we all believed him. I could have gone out gladly then and faced the Emperor himself. Oh, if only they had come for me at once!

I had been feeling braver for nearly a week; I had begun to forget about the lame man and the inn, to think that was all past and washed out; I dreamt one night I could have walked away through the prison walls, but so despised it that I chose to stay. I led in the singing; I heartened the others. I felt I was ready. And then – well, you know, you know how it is with a woman – I needn't tell you, any woman would understand – but they came just a day too late and I wasn't feeling brave or strong any longer. Oh, I cannot understand why God ordered that! It was my body, not my spirit. Because of being just then.

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They took me up into the sunlight, but I wasn't glad of it, I just felt very weak and dazzled. They put the questions to me: would I sacrifice to the Emperor and the other gods? I had strength enough to say no. There were only the soldiers and the magistrate there, not one of the Brothers or Sisters to stand by me and pray so that I could hear it. There wasn't even the angry crowd like a force one must stand against, that perhaps one may move a little. Only me and those others who were doing it all as a part of their duty. Like a cart-wheel goes round. A wheel. They began to bind me on to the wheel and I heard myself screaming. I couldn't help it. I hadn't even been hurt. I screamed and pulled away. They let me go and the magistrate asked me again. And again I said no, because I couldn't help that either. They were taking me back towards the wheel, but he stopped them. He looked – oh, just tired of it all, and so hard. He said: 'No use: I know this sort; take her away.' For a second I thought it was over, I was to go back, a miracle had happened. But the soldier said: 'How?' And the magistrate answered: 'The fire.'

So I was pulled out into a sort of big yard; I think they jabbed me with their spears till I went. There was a pile of wood at one end with some tar on it. They laughed at me, saying I wasn't worth the wood, saying how I'd smell, saying – oh, they were the nastiest soldiers I'd seen! And I was tied to the post and they set fire to the wood and stood back, and I

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couldn't think, I couldn't speak. I couldn't believe it was really happening to me. Not till I felt the flames come close. And then – then I tried to say I would do anything they liked, I would make the sacrifice. Yes, I did that. But no one heard because I was choking in the smoke and because of the roaring the fire made.

And the flames came jumping at me and I began calling out for Lucius. And all the time, 'Lucius!' I called, 'Lucius! Lucius!' And I saw my own feet and hands –

Oh friend, friend, that was all.

You are going away from Rome. This is a station. This is a train. You go into this tiny lit room with windows, and things begin to move past the windows. It is all shaking and jarring and there is a great noise in your ears. I will not come with you. It is shaking me out of you. But will you – oh, will you if you can, free me? If you could tell people. So that it could all be clear and plain and forgiven. Oh, before I leave you, before I go back to be alone again, say you will tell and say people will forgive me! It all happened a long time ago, and I have been alone in the dark ever since. Ah, you are going away from Rome . . . and I . . . must stay. . . .

Little ghost, little ghost, have I laid you,
In some quiet garden stayed you,
Far from the smell of wood burning
Or any grim spiked wheel turning and turning?

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Have I laid you to sleep under an arch of flowers,
To dream sweetly there through the hot hours?
Ah, you shall wake at evening to the bridegroom
 bending
Over your lips, and a long, sad story's ending!
Little ghost, little ghost.

THE AMPHITHEATRE AT POLA

FOURTH CENTURY A.D.

THIS was five years ago, you see, before my mistress was married. I've done a deal of travelling in my time, what with my old master being Governor and always changing about whenever we were settled anywhere, and now my mistress – Honoria that is: her mother died a year back, you know – going to take the waters and visiting about in all the chief cities; but I've never seen a place I liked so well as Colonia Julia. Only may be it was just because of all I was feeling there – ah, well.

We had two houses. One was the Governor's house, of course, and a nasty, draughty, old-fashioned sort of place it was; but the other we took in spring when it began to be warm, over on the islands, which aren't more than a pleasant sail from the mouth of the harbour and really most convenient in every way. All the best families were going there, and we couldn't have had it more select nor nicer for the young ladies. There was very safe riding all about; I used to have to ride behind when they went out and I was never much of a one for horses, but I didn't fall off more than twice there, and that was only when the boys

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had been playing tricks with my saddle. Good bathing, too, for those who like it – I don't – and such fruit and flowers, I don't know the names for half of them. Honoria, now, she used to tell me all about them and what they were good for; then we'd gather the leaves and try them, and by and bye they'd be sure to come in useful. Very kind to me the young ladies were always, most of all Honoria; I really considered I belonged to her, but of course she was never away from her mother in those days, and we weren't any of us exactly fond of *her*. But anyway it was a fine, gay summer we had on the islands or in the town, and Honoria began making friends with a young officer on the Governor's staff; and he's my master now.

But as to my own affairs: well, they don't take long. My friend was working at the new amphitheatre that they had been at for years just outside the town. He came from that part of the country, or rather a bit to the south; they're all very good at building down there: bridges, arches, public offices, anything; you find them half over the world, always the best. Yes, it was there my friend came from. A heathen? Oh no, not at all! A good Christian, always at church on Sundays when he'd the time: he could write a bit, and cipher too. Not a common labourer, but one of the foremen: as much as twenty men under him sometimes. And very respectable: he didn't drink, not more than enough to make him lively – and you wouldn't want a young man who wasn't ever – and he was saving up his wages. Basil his name was, and he

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was just a bit older than me. What was he like? Oh well, he was dark, with a little black beard – he used to clip it every month – and not very tall, but as strong as any Scythian, and quick at things; he used to sit at the block, making out plans of the arches and whistling; often, often I've watched him. He'd got his hands a trifle scarred with working at rough stone when he was a lad, but that was all.

We'd made friends over his coming up to do a bit of work at the Governor's house – get the staircase seen to – and after that we were always meeting whenever I was in the town. I'd told Honoria almost at once, and she couldn't have been nicer or sweeter to me – the dear young lady she always was, and is now, for all people say she's getting very strict. She'd be sure to take me into the town whenever she went herself, and then it was, 'Go and match me this silk, Felicia, and we shan't want you again till this evening,' and off I'd go to the new theatre and find my friend. I got to know a lot about building that way, though I never could make out about how the arches could ever take the great weights they did. Coming in from the islands, we used to see it a bit more finished every time. When we'd seen it first they had the best part of the outside done, all except the tops of the four towers, and the gutters and sockets for the awning posts, but they'd a good deal to do to the inside, putting in the seats and steps and all the stage arrangements, and fitting up the dressing-rooms and the dens for the wild beasts and criminals and whatnot.

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My master was to open it, of course, to preside at the first games they had and give a speech; so we had plenty of preparations to make in the house. The mistress had a dress sent over from Rome direct, but the young ladies' were made at home; my Honoria had a white Persian silk with silver embroidery up the skirt, so thick it almost stood by itself, and the long sleeves set in at the shoulders with little blue knots, very fashionable at that time; she had a silver girdle to go with it, set with turquoise, and a fillet to match for her head: her mantle was a blue spot gauze edged with seed pearls: and sweetly pretty she looked in it! I remember the trouble we had getting blue flowers for her to wear with it when the day came. But I'm running on.

Well, my friend and I used to meet as often as we could; in the evening there was always something going on in the market-place outside the Porta Aurea: music perhaps – and I do like a good tune – or a band of strolling cripples to divert us, or a man from the mountains with bears. And always the great crowd strolling about; a little pushing, perhaps, but what's that when one's got one's young man there to see that nobody's rude.

As soon as I saw it was earnest – and it was earnest from the very start almost – I began to hint to Honoria that I was wanting to get married. And she saw – bless her heart! – and she was sure it would be all right; it wasn't as though they'd ever had to find fault with me. I told her my Basil had enough saved up to

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be able to buy my freedom, but she wouldn't hear of that, said she'd do it herself. 'But listen!' she said, 'I want to see this Basil of yours and make sure he's good enough for you.' She said that.

Well, the time went on for the theatre to be finished, and there was a great to-do about what games they were to have at the opening. Of course there were to be chariot-races, and our old mistress was to give the prizes and crowns. It ought to have been the young ladies – all the town was saying so, and my Honoria's officer's groom, who used to be up at the house most days with messages and flowers and such like, always had the latest gossip – they weren't ever allowed to do anything – such a shame, we all thought, but there! She was jealous of them, so good and pretty and clever as they were. Then there were to be criminals eaten by wild beasts in a scene representing an African village – no expense spared – and some Syrian dancers just come over, and recitations, and more chariot-racing, and an elephant fight, and then little tablets thrown among the audience with prizes written on them; you went and claimed them afterwards, and you could get anything from a cooking-pot to a chariot and pair. You see they wanted to give the theatre a good start.

But what concerned me was that they were going to have a grand procession of all the builders, with garlands, and singing a song that had been specially composed for the occasion by one of the best Greek musicians. They were to go all round the arena, and

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then our master was to make them a speech of thanks and give them each a little bronze medal. I did look forward to that. Basil was going to wave to me, and I was to throw him a bunch of roses. I didn't know where I was going to sit at first: I thought very likely up at the top with the rest of the household. Of course it's a dreadful scramble getting there, and one doesn't see at all well, or hear either. But then, I was sitting sewing one afternoon when in ran Honoria. 'Oh, Felicia,' she said, 'I've arranged for you to come and carry our cushions, so you'll be with us in the best seats at the bottom!' 'Oh, my lady!' I said, and dropped a needle. I was thinking I couldn't wave to Basil from there. But she gave me a shake. 'Don't "my lady" me! I've heard all about it, and you're to throw your roses just the same: and you're to bring him round to see me afterwards, and then – then I shall tell him how bad it is of him, carrying you off like this!' So I kissed the hem of her frock – my tall, dear young lady – and went and told Basil.

I had to be back at the island for the last few days before the opening, and I was disappointed – I was going to have made Basil's crown – but we were to be over in good time for the opening. Basil and I went for a long walk all round the harbour that evening before I left. We were talking about getting married, all the little plans one makes, you know: he talked a bit about his work – he was very fond of his work – and while he was talking I was half listening and half thinking of the dresses I could make out of all the

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pieces of stuff I had. And then – oh well, we came back along the edge of the water and saw the town lights popping up one by one till it was all bright and blinking, with flares against the white high walls of the new theatre and through the lower arches where they were still working. We said good-bye at the corner of the street. I never let him see me quite back to the house: it wouldn't have been nice for all the silly young girls to see us. I remember he said: 'It'll be soon now: and I shall be done with *that*.' He looked back over his shoulder at the theatre. 'And I shall be glad. Who wouldn't change a stone for a woman?' I know I laughed and whispered: 'Don't let the stone hear you!' And then it was good-bye, good-bye, and he went back whistling.

We came over from the islands, all dressed and ready for the opening games, both the young ladies looking fit to kiss. I tidied their hair for them after the sail, and picked up the cushions, and then off we went to the theatre. I'd got on a dark red dress, very quiet and suitable, but it set off my figure – I was proud of my figure in those days – and just went with the roses. And the dear young ladies, between them, they'd gone and got me a necklace of gold beads. For my marriage-chest, they said. I've got them still, locked up: I'll show them you, if you like.

There was a great crowd that day, the biggest I've ever seen, everyone in the streets going one way: but they all made room for our litter. I'd seen the inside of the theatre often enough before, but never like it

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was now, all hung with green garlands, and the great striped awning shading it! We hadn't been there ten minutes before we thought it was quite full, but more and more came in, till you couldn't see the stone for the crowd. It was half an hour before anything happened, but we were right in the middle of the best seats, where we could see everyone's dresses and guess if their pearls were real. Such lovely scents all the ladies had, too. Of course you can't compare it with Rome, but still we had some very good society at Colonia Julia.

The games were very fine, particularly the wild beasts. I was really quite frightened. But my young ladies liked the chariot-racing best; you see that young officer came round to our seats just before and told them all about it. But really I was waiting for the procession at the end. Well, at last it came, we heard the music; and then they started, marching from the far end. I was all of a tremble and I felt the stalks of my roses running into my hand. Honoria whispered, 'Which is he?' as they began going past, and I was just waiting to say, 'There!' and throw my roses. I knew a lot of them, his friends, but I wasn't taking any interest in them. I looked and looked, and they went on, all of them, down to the last little prentice boy, and they formed up and I could see them all. But he wasn't there. I think I was crying then, because I remember my mistress taking my hand and stroking it and saying it couldn't be anything serious. And then there were the tablets thrown: I

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didn't try to catch them, but one fell just at my feet. I took it up, and it said a silk scarf. But I only wanted to get away quick and find out what had happened.

I heard soon enough: it was the day before. He'd been going round the top fitting the awning, and a rope broke. He fell right from the top to the bottom. I asked to see him, but his friends wouldn't let me. And I think it would have been too much for me; I'm naturally of a nervous disposition. My poor dear Basil; they say he broke every bone in his body. I put my trust in our meeting again in heaven; but of course it won't be quite the same thing.

After that my young mistress got married – next spring it was – and I came away with her. No, I shan't ever have a friend again, not serious, I mean, like I was with Basil. I don't think it often happens more than once.

Here's the gold necklace, you see. I don't wear it now. It wouldn't be suitable. And here's his hair, a piece I cut off one day; very black it is still. And those? Oh, those are the roses I meant to throw him, but he was dead when I was picking them. You'd hardly know they were roses, would you? You see, this was five years ago.

IN PATRIA POTESTATE

FIFTH CENTURY A.D.

THE day I was ten I came in from the fields in the evening; my father struck my mother on the breast with the hilt of his dagger. A fortnight afterwards she died. If she had lived longer I think he would have divorced her. I don't know, even now, whether he was my real father; he had a quick temper and so have I, but I doubt if I could ever be so hard on my children as he was on me; and I was never like him to look at. I always hope my real father was not him but someone I should like.

After that he married again. His second wife was not beautiful like my mother; she was short and brown; sometimes she had a rash on her face, and her hands were always hot and sticky to touch. She was always just going to have a baby, too, or else nursing one; I used to think the whole house smelled of small babies. I hated it.

I learned to read and write as a child, and when I was older I wanted to study law; but what was the good? I never had any money of my own, so I never could buy books, still less go to a Law School. After a time I began to suspect, from things the servants

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said, that my mother had left me her money, but of course I never could find out about it from my father, and there was no one else I could go to and ask about my rights. It wasn't as if I ever got into the town, even. My father made me work all day in the fields with the labourers; in summer I was up at dawn and came back in the evenings too tired to eat my supper. In winter I read all the books in the house, and made up cases in my head, and wrote defences and indictments for them, and said them aloud to myself up in the garret. But even in January I had to be out and working while there was light enough to see my spade.

My stepmother was kind to me when she remembered, but she had her own children to look after; and I never liked her. But my father found fault with me over nothing, and beat me, and never believed what I said. Sometimes I was so frightened of him that I didn't dare join the others at meals, but had mine in the kitchen and talked to the old cook, Magsa, a Numidian, who had come to us with my mother. He or his wife used to keep things hot for me when I was late in after lambing, and when there were guests he saved fruit and sweetmeats for me. One day my father found this out and was very angry; so the next week a dealer came and bought Magsa, but not his wife. Magsa clung to my father's knees and begged not to be separated from her; and I spoke out against the injustice of it, wondering a little whether it would be like this to plead in Court. But nothing would move my father. When I saw this I flared up, calling

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him a wicked man (as I think he was), catching him by the arm and shaking him; my hands were covered with clay from ditching and they made brown smears on his sleeve. Then my father looked at me more blackly than I had ever seen him, saying: 'Very well: after this you shall not stay an hour longer in my house. In the old days I could have sold you. By God, I would have!'

I stared back at my father. I crossed my arms on my chest and tried hard not to move a muscle, but really I was deep down frightened and cold. The only thing was that I suddenly noticed I was taller than he was. That comforted me rather. 'Out with you, young man!' he said again, quite quietly, and stuck his chin out. I don't think I should have minded so much if he had simply lost his temper. I couldn't help looking once from him to my stepmother, and she ran over, I will say that for her, and bade me ask his pardon and begged him to forgive me. But I wouldn't kneel! Besides, I knew it was no use when he looked like that.

I turned and left the room. As I passed the dealer he made a little sign to me with his hand. I went up to my room and made a bundle out of my thick cloak and two or three books, and then I went out. The servants wished me luck. The head groom gave me a little money and a strap for my bundle, and my stepmother came running out with some cheese and a whole cake. But all the same I was very nearly crying. Then I went through the yard; I know I even patted

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one of the pigs. The dealer was just chaining Magsa on at the tail of his gang; Magsa's wife was clinging on to him, and kissing him and howling. After a minute or two the dealer drove her off with his whip, but he winked at me and said: 'Come along, lad,' so I came.

We went north-east, up among the hills, in long, slow days, trading and exchanging, and whispering dirty stories and never getting a chance of a wash. I lost all sense of where I was and whether I was yet in the Empire. By and bye we were among real barbarians, buying cheap and selling dear. The dealer wasn't a bad sort in some ways, and would have liked me to stay on and help him with his gang, but he wanted me to sleep with him and I wasn't having any of that, and told him so. I said that when he sold Magsa I would try to get taken on by the same master.

So at last we came to the big house of a Goth, whose name was Radimir, and the dealer sold him Magsa, who was a good cook, for nearly twice what he had given my father for him. He and the Goth talked for a few minutes, while I stood by Magsa with my bundle in my hand, trying to make up my mind what wages to ask for. He came over and touched my elbow and whispered: 'I've arranged it all.' I began to thank him, but he said: 'Oh, it's nothing,' and grinned and walked out, and in a few minutes I heard him get the gang together and go off. Magsa and I were taken along to the kitchen by one of the slaves, and given big bowls of stewed mutton and onions,

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while the others asked us questions. I felt very shy and didn't know how to answer, so Magsa, who likes talking, did most of it.

By and bye Radimir sent for us. He told Magsa what he was to do every day, and Magsa nodded and showed his teeth very cheerfully. Then he asked me what my name was, and I answered: 'Cassian.' He swore at me and said I was to 'sir' him, which annoyed me rather, from a Goth; however, I said I was sorry and then asked what wages the dealer had arranged. 'Wages?' said Radimir. 'Arranged?' said Radimir. And his face turned red and lumpy and he roared at me: 'My slaves don't get wages!'

I felt very sick and as if the room were going round and round. I couldn't explain, but Magsa did. Radimir only shouted with laughter and said: 'I've paid for him - got him damn cheap too! It's up to him to prove it!'

Just then an old man, whom he called Uncle, came blustering into the room. 'Is this the Roman?' he yelled, 'I'll pay him what they did to me!' And he brought his stick hard down on my shoulders, so that I fell sideways against the wall. Radimir, still laughing, called to him to stop, and when he did Magsa put his arms round me, whispering me to take comfort, with tears in his own eyes. I stood up again, with the tunic torn half off my back. Radimir looked at me, half pitying, half scornful. 'You say it's all a mistake,' he said, 'but I think you've tasted whip before. How's that?' He could see, of course, the

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marks on my back where my father had beaten me; it leaves little whitey scars that never quite go. Sometimes I believe that having those is the thing that makes me angriest with my father. Anyhow, I told Radimir how it was, and I think he saw it was true. He laughed again and said: 'Thank the Gods, my boys and I aren't under your Roman Law!' I hated that. And then he said: 'But even if I'm to believe all this, I've bought you now, and you'll have to work your price out. Never mind, we shan't be hard on you here.' I didn't quite know what the law of it was, especially in Goth-land, and I thought I might make things worse by arguing, so I said: 'Very well, sir,' and went out with Magsa.

I worked on the farm, among the beasts chiefly. I liked being with the horses; there were yearling colts running with the mares and they wrinkled their noses friendlily at me; when no one was looking I used to ride a chestnut mare. Most of the other slaves were Goths or Northerners of some sort, and it took me a little time to learn their language; they weren't anxious to help me, either, and I often did a thing wrong while the others looked on and laughed; I wondered sometimes if my father and the dealer realized the bad turn they had done to the Roman dignity, through me! Magsa was in the kitchen and I hardly ever saw him, but when I did he spoke to me as if I'd still been his superior, as if he still respected me; that always left me hopeful. In some ways, perhaps, the life was not so hard as it had been at home;

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at any rate I used to try and do my work well there, but here, like all but a few of the others, I always shirked when I could. But yet, in the old days, I could always look forward to something happening, my father dying, perhaps, as he must some day, which would give me my rights and let me take up my inheritance and start life, though late, free and for myself. Now everything was doubtful; I was out of the Empire, under strange laws and customs; and as for getting free, that depended now entirely on the good will of a Goth. It was no use going to Magsa for advice; he was slave-born and had never known any other life than belonging to one master or another; he was very unhappy about his wife from time to time, but Radimir was kinder to him than my father had been.

I kept well out of the way of the old Uncle, who was never so happy as when he was knocking me about; I don't know what the grudge was that he bore against all Romans – the others laughed at him. It was probably something that happened during the last war: he walked lame from an old wound. There were four sons of the house, two older than me, one younger, and one, Giamund, my own age; but it was six months before I saw Giamund; he had been away in the East, over the hills, staying with some cousins. It was after sunset, and I was driving the sheep in; they had been very wild, and I was late and afraid the head shepherd would be angry with me. I had just got them turned into the lane down to the byres when

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Giamund jumped over the high bank, just in front of them. Of course his horse frightened them all back again, past me, into the open. Not knowing who he was, I swore at him properly in Latin, which was usually quite safe with the Goths, and when he answered me back in the same tongue, and I saw by his clothes and his sword that he was somebody – well, I wished I was one of my own sheep! However, he just laughed, and helped me to get the flock together again, and then asked me who I was; I told him and he seemed interested.

A few days afterwards I saw him again; he dismounted close to me and called, and I ran over and help him to get a stone out of his mare's hoof, noticing how she nuzzled up to him all the time, and rubbed his shoulder with her nose. When it was done he stood away for a moment, watching how she moved her leg, in case there was a strain, while I patted her neck and pulled burrs out of her mane. He was altogether bigger than me, with thick bones at his wrists and ankles, his hair plaited behind him in the Goth way. I stroked the mare under her soft chin and said: 'She's a beauty!' Giamund was pleased. 'Isn't she!' he said, and then: 'Would you like to ride?' I said: 'Yes!' and I suppose I looked as delighted as I was, because Giamund laughed and said: 'Get up and try! You won't be able to stick on.' I mounted in rather a scramble and the mare looked round, surprised at finding anyone else on her back; he clapped his hands and yelled to her. She was away over the

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field at a gallop and I was nearly off in the first minute, but I found my seat again, and it was glorious! Then he shouted and she turned in her tracks, and this time too I had to hold on by her mane, but I did stick it. When she stopped by him again and began nibbling his cloak and I slid off, he said: 'You can ride all right. You must come and hunt with me some day.' I thanked him and held my hands cupped for him to mount, but he vaulted on without touching me. I did hunt with him several times after that, and once or twice we talked; I liked him best of the lot.

The Uncle had been away for some time, which made things easier, when one day I was in the stables, sweeping, and Giamund burst in. 'You can write, can't you?' I nodded. 'Come on then!' I ran over to the house with him. There was pen and ink and I wrote from their dictation, not always very easily, as they all talked at once. As far as I could make out, what had happened was that the Uncle had gone into Imperial territory, picked a quarrel with a Roman citizen (he would, of course!) and killed him. He had been arrested and was now awaiting trial, and my master was sending this letter to the murdered man's son, offering to pay the blood-fine he would have had to pay in Goth-land and coolly asking for his Uncle's release. He seemed to think this was very generous! I wondered whether to say anything, and finally did, explaining that the money was very little use and the Uncle would have to stand his trial under Roman Law. At this they all clamoured, first shouting at me, and

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then talking together in high voices like women at the far end of the room. I could not follow what they said and was going out, but Giamund stopped me, saying: 'If they won't take the fine, they shan't have anything! We're going to get Uncle away from them and back here; then they can come and find him if they dare!'

'You won't try and take him by force, sir?' I said. 'It's an act of war!'

'Let it be!' said Giamund, 'We're off now, and you too, in case we need you.'

I was startled. 'Me! What for?'

'Someone may have to think we're Romans. If so, you must do the talking.' He looked at me and he seemed to be very big.

But I backed towards the door, saying: 'I won't go against the laws! I'm not coming!'

'Oh, aren't you!' said Giamund, and he was beside me in two steps and got me by the hands and began bending them back, saying: 'Don't fight or I'll break your wrists.'

Still, I wasn't going to trot after them like a dog! I was bound to fight, and I did. I think he tried not to hurt me very much, but he got my right hand twisted over almost at once and forced me down on to my knees, feeling pretty sick. He tied my feet to make sure, and the youngest boy, who wasn't going, put linen dipped in cold water round the sprain. Giamund came back, pulled me up and over to the door, and lifted me on to the mare in front of him. He was wearing scale armour under his tunic; leaning against

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him I could feel the edges of it, and his sword and dagger as well. There were Radimir, the three sons, and about twenty of the men, with a few led horses; they went south-west at a steady trot, and my arm ached up to the shoulder.

After a time Giamund spoke: 'Are you here willingly or unwillingly, Cassian?' I answered that I was unwilling, and he said: 'You've got to be willing when the time comes. I'll be behind with my dagger.' Then again, when I didn't answer: 'Well, are you going to be sensible? It'll save trouble in the long run.'

We were jolting down-hill and my wrist hurt abominably. 'I don't care what you do to me!' I said. 'I'm a Roman citizen and it's my duty to protect my own laws from a pack of Goths! I'll obey you as long as I can decently, but now I can't and won't! Your Uncle murdered a man, and I shan't be sorry if he swings for it!'

After I'd said this I got rather frightened, because nobody said anything, and I thought Giamund was going to be angry and hit me, and I didn't so much mind being killed, but I did hate the idea of anyone hitting my sore arm again for a bit! But instead, Giamund began to laugh, and he rubbed his hand through my hair and called out to his father: 'Cassian doesn't want Uncle rescued. He won't do what he's told, and says we're a pack of Goths! What's to be done with him?'

'Throw him off on to the road,' answered Radimir

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over his shoulder, 'and leave him to cool his heels till we come back. That'll teach him what his duty is!'

I thought they might, and began to get violently angry with them for being in a position to be able to do that! But Giamund said: 'No, I won't. I've smashed his wrist for him already, but he's not afraid of me; he's too good for a Roman. Let's make him a Goth, father!' Then he said to me: 'Will you be a Goth, Cassian? We'll free you and give you a horse, and then you can come with us willingly, and Uncle shan't ever touch you again!'

But I was much too angry by then even to begin considering it, and told him he'd better throw me on to the road. 'Well,' he said, 'it's a good offer: take it or leave it.' Then he told one of the men to bring up a spare horse and cut the rope that tied my feet. I mounted and rode on beside Giamund, holding the reins with my left hand. I couldn't possibly have got away.

When it got dark the road was going steadily downhill between pine trees; we camped among them and slept, after Giamund had tied me to a tree with the reins. We rode on in the early morning, eating bread and raisins as we went; suddenly we got clear of the woods on to a spur of the hills, and there was the flat, reasonable plain, in front of us, towns and cornfields, and my own great brown river with steep hills at the far side. Soon we began to pass huts, and a few peasants who ran away from us. Radimir led us along by-roads till we came to a halt in a chestnut

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grove. A few of the slaves were left here with the spare horses, but all the brave and well-armed men went on with my master and his sons. 'Now,' said Giamund, 'are you coming with us, Cassian, or are you staying with the slaves?' Well, I looked at the horse-holders and I didn't want to stay with them; I looked at Giamund and I did want to go with him. It was such an adventure, and if it was all wrong, it would happen whether I went or not, and I hated being out of it. Perhaps it was wrong of me, but I was sick of being always among slaves! Besides, my arm was feeling much better. I said: 'I'll go!' and Giamund caught hold of my sound hand, saying: 'You're a Goth after all!' We rode down, still keeping off the main roads, till we were near the town.

Then there was a council. They had to find out where and when the trial would be held, without being suspected themselves. I thought that, as I was in it, I might as well do it thoroughly, so I offered to go and find out. Radimir naturally didn't trust me, so Giamund went too, leaving his sword behind but taking his dagger hidden under his cloak. We walked in like travellers; when we got to the middle of the town we went into the biggest wine-shop, where I talked and stood drinks all round. Quite soon, of course, they got on to the murder. The Uncle was apparently going to come up before the magistrates next day, and as nothing had been heard from his friends, everyone was looking forward to one Goth the less! I sympathized with them loudly, which was

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funny, as Giamund had to agree or they would have suspected him. As soon as we'd found out all we wanted we set off through the town back to the northern gate; it was market-day and crowded. We were pushing past a bunch of old women with geese to sell when I heard a voice I knew: and there was my father riding straight towards me! I ducked and began fumbling with my sandal-strap and stayed so till he was past, just at my back. Giamund whispered: 'What is it?' and I answered that it was my father, come north for some reason. Giamund looked after him for a minute and then said: 'I don't like your father.' Neither had I, that glimpse I had of him! Those hard, black eyes and that awful, square chin; I remembered them much too well. I didn't contradict Giamund.

Back at the meeting-place, we told Radimir what we'd heard; he decided to do nothing till the next day. They didn't tie me up that night and I almost wished they had, because I woke up when it was still dark, convinced I was doing wrong and only wondering whether I ought to go at once and warn the magistrates. I had nearly decided I must, and I did wish I had not been left free to betray Giamund and his people; but fortunately I went to sleep again, and when I woke it was morning and things felt different. The trial was to be in the afternoon. We started for the town when it was getting hot and people would be going out of the streets; we went in by different gates, only two or three at a time, looking as peaceful as possible. I enjoyed it at first, but when we actually

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saw the Court House, and the magistrates standing together and talking before they went in, I began to feel very doubtful and unhappy. Giamund saw, and told me to wait with the horses, as I was unarmed, and anyhow couldn't use my right hand. The magistrates' procession formed up in the square and they went in, all calm and unhasting, as they might have done for centuries before. The Goths followed with the rest of the onlookers; and I waited while the shadow of the pillar in the middle of the square moved round and lengthened. It was a pretty square with white marble round the doors and windows of the houses, and glimpses of well-heads and green court-yards; pigeons kept on flying across to pick up the corn that our horses dropped. Everything was quiet and hot; the horses stamped and rubbed their heads against their fore-legs; my arm ached rather.

All at once the quiet broke up, the horses pricked their ears and fidgeted, and the Court House came pouring out like a kicked ants' nest. People were scattering and screaming, running up the side streets and then running back; they made no sort of a fight and I was ashamed of them! They only threw a few stones when the Goths came rushing back to their horses, carrying the Uncle, in chains, among them. I saw they had a few prisoners as well and hoped no one had been killed, but there wasn't time to ask questions; we galloped hard back through the ringing streets.

When we got to the spare horses we thought we

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were being pursued, so there was only time to mount the prisoners and see to one or two of the men who were a little hurt. I knew by the sight of a white toga that they had taken one of the magistrates, but it was not till we were riding through the pines again that I saw they had got my father too. I fell back to the tail of the troop, wondering what to do, and when we camped I kept as far as I could from the prisoners; at any rate they were being well treated; I hadn't got to bother about that.

I was sitting by one of the fires, nursing my arm, when I saw Giamund standing to windward, watching me. He spoke: 'Cassian, you did us good service over this; father says you've earned your freedom and he's going to give it you. You changed your mind about coming with us; won't you change your mind about the other thing too and be made one of us? It's a shame you should ever be against us, and you're bound to be, sooner or later, if you're a Roman.'

Of course I was very much pleased, and just for a moment it seemed as if this was reasonable. And I did like Giamund. But I saw it was impossible. I said I was very sorry but I could never become a Goth; and I wanted to go to a Law School. I saw how much this puzzled him, but he let it pass as part of the difference between us, saying he'd ask his father to help me. Then I said: 'He'd better not free me till after my father's gone, for he might want me back.' And I said: 'I'd rather be your father's slave than my own father's son!' And I think I cried a bit because

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I did hate my father, and everything had been rather upsetting. Giamund patted me on the back very hard and didn't know what to say. But he didn't laugh at me.

It took us twice as long coming back; I did my best to keep out of my father's way, but he saw me the second day. I didn't expect he'd be pleased, but he needn't have shown it so plainly! He growled: 'So you're here, are you? Hoping to ruin your country and your father both, I suppose!' I said: 'I'm where you put me, father. But I'm sorry we meet like this.' He didn't, of course, know that I'd been sold as a slave; and I wasn't going to tell him. He turned to the magistrate, a thin grey-haired man who rode beside him. 'That's my eldest son,' he said. 'You wouldn't think it, would you, Lampadius? An undutiful son! God, there's nothing bitterer. I was patient with him for years, but at last it became too much. I had to punish him; I cast him out of my household, un-blessed. And he's found a fitting home among these savages!' The magistrate, of course, looked horrified; I was angry but asked, quite civilly, about my step-mother. He answered me curtly and began to talk to his neighbour again. I dropped behind at that, in a great burst of laughing from Radimir.

We got back to the house and everyone rushed out to welcome the Uncle. The prisoners' ransoms were discussed and everyone had an opinion. I was told that the magistrate wished to speak to me, and went to him at once; he was sitting by himself in a locked

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room with a small fire. He looked at me gravely and said: 'Young man, your father has told me of your past life. It pains me to hear of such things. I had always believed that in our old Roman state the son knew his duty to his father.' I waited for him to finish, wondering what lies he had been told. He went on: 'I hope your punishment has taken effect on you – your looks are not altogether bad. If so, the opportunity has come to show your repentance. I cannot help thinking – against my better judgment perhaps – that the barbarians dragged you by force into this affair. I want you now to speak to this Radimir, to tell him that I and my fellow-prisoners cannot pay an immoderate ransom. For myself, the expenses of the magistracy eat up all the little income my estate affords me; your father has his children to support; the others are in not much better case. I believe you will be able to persuade the Goths of this; and so repay some of the injury you have done to your father and to the Empire.'

I considered for a moment and then said: 'Sir, when you bid me go to Radimir – for anything our Law asks me I take as a command – do you understand that I am his slave?'

The magistrate looked shocked and said: 'No. No! Unhappy boy, what else have you done to get yourself into this position? Surely what your father told me was enough!' He got up and began to pace about the room. I liked his face.

I said: 'Even if I am a slave just now I think I shall

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be able to help you. My master is not a bad man, really. But others are. I don't know what my father may have said about me, but I am sure it was lies. Will you let me tell my story?' He nodded, and I told him everything clearly, from the time I was a child; it was one of those hours when the word springs at once after the thought; I never hesitated, and I watched his face all the time. It seemed to interest him that my passion had always been for the Law. I ended by offering to get Magsa to confirm my story; he agreed. I asked one of the men if he might be sent for; I waited till he came and then went out, saying no word to him but leaving him to give his own evidence.

I then went straight to Giamund and told him that it would make a very bad impression if they were to hold a magistrate to ransom. It was no use talking to a Goth about the divinity of the Roman Law, but they were rather anxious already about what they had done, and afraid of reprisals. They were not very far from the frontier. So when I went back to the magistrate it was to tell him that they had fixed on a very reasonable sum. He rose from his seat when I came in, saying: 'I am convinced of the truth of your story; justice must be done. I will try and buy you back from these Goths myself.' I told him that Radimir was going to free me. 'Very good,' he said, 'your father shall loose you from his power and give you your lawful inheritance afterwards.'

Nothing could have been better for me. The magistrate sent for my father; I only wish I could have

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heard what he said to him! The next day we were all together in the big, rush-strewn hall; only the Uncle had been lured out by a boar-hunt, as nobody wanted the Romans to be insulted. Radimir, his beard newly combed, was on the high place at one end, his hand on the head of the youngest boy; Giamund was leaning on the arm of the chair, and the other two were sitting on the steps beside him, all warm and gay in scarlet cloth and sheepskins, with boots of soft, ringed leather and gold-linked belts and bracelets. And down at the other end there was my father, sullen and frowning, a five-days growth of black beard on his chin, and me, his son, a dirty bandage round my wrist and wearing someone else's cast-off tunic and breeches – my own had gone into holes long ago! Oh, I was ashamed of our citizenship. But then the magistrate came in, tall and courteous, respected by all. Radimir stepped down to meet him, they talked for a moment and then called me up. The magistrate put his hand on my shoulder, and all at once I was proud again of what he stood for and what I hoped to stand for one day.

First of all Radimir shook my hand and drank to me; that meant I was free from him, and Giamund and his brothers came round me, laughing and wishing me well. Then I had to get out of my father's power. It was done by a sort of sham sale that happened three times over; my father was grumbling to himself all the time, and the Goths looked on and said what they thought of it, which was rather funny, at least it would

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have been, if I hadn't been so desperately excited. In the end of this pretence sale and freeing the magistrate was left as my patron; but really he has been more like a father to me, the kind of father I used to imagine, who helps one with one's work and gives one advice without seeming to. He had prepared a document, too, for my father to sign; he did so, muttering and breaking the first pen they lent him. I was going to get my money and be really free at last! I went out to the stables with Giamund; everything looked bright and jolly and different. He gave me a horse of his own and tried once more to get me to stop with them.

Before I went I borrowed money from the magistrate against my inheritance, and bought back Magsa. Later I bought back his wife from my father, who had married her to the new cook he had got after Magsa, poor thing, but they were so pleased to see one another again that they forgot all about it. After that they came here with me; he is a better cook than I need as a student, but I owe very much to him; and his wife mends my clothes and keeps everything tidy. My wrist still hurts in wet weather, but it is hardly at all stiff.

It was the magistrate, of course, who helped me to get here; he gave me letters of introduction to some of the professors. I write to him often; so far I have told him only of success: may it go on so! I write to Giamund sometimes too; he can read, but as to writing, he can only just sign his name. So I have to wait

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for answers till there's someone there who can do it for him. He sent me a silver cup with twisted handles last year. It is a Goth thing and my friends here laugh at it, but yet I have it set out on my table, and drink from it, to peace and good laws.

‘I’M A BUSINESS MAN’

FIFTH CENTURY A.D.

PERHAPS you will say this is the story of a failure. But it only goes to prove what I’ve said for years, that they’ve no business to allow all and sundry to be citizens the way they do! My people, now, we’re a good Spanish family, citizens since Claudius’ time (not that he didn’t overdo it, but Lord, it’s nothing to nowadays); there’s always been one or two every generation in the army, and I’ve a second cousin in the Senate at Rome this very day. But I’ve stuck to the business myself, and a very decent little business it is; I always say the wine trade is the one thing you can be sure of. My brother’s in charge of the depôt in Britain, where we’ve a good sale most years.

Well, I was coming back from there late on in autumn, when we ran into a storm and got carried up channel, with the coast of North Gaul grim and black-looking on the right. I’m no sailor myself, and the best I could do was to keep out of the way while they edged her along through the evening and the great waves knocked her half over every minute, and by and bye we could hear the roaring on the rocks nearer and nearer, as we were beaten in. I’m not what you call a

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religious man, but I said my prayers that night, and all at once the storm cleared up, and by dawn we were rocking about on a cold, clear sea, with the sun full out again: and no land to be seen. The worst was, our mainmast was snapped off close to the deck, and the captain – a good, honest man he was – had a leg broken.

So we lay to and the sailors got things cleared up a bit, and I went below and lay down, wrapped in a blanket while my things were drying. I must have gone to sleep, for when I remember anything next there was a great yelling and stamping above me and I ran up half awake – I'd had no sleep the night before – thinking the storm was on us again. Before I saw what was happening I was knocked flat and a man sitting on my chest. And there I was.

Did you ever see one of those hairy great pirates out of the North? – not stripped and scarred in the slave-market, I mean, but all hot and savage, with a black bearskin over his chest and an iron helmet with horns over his red hair? And a three-foot sword with blood dripping off it just at your nose! That's what I saw.

We were bundled off on to the pirate ship, me in my blanket still, and anything that was worth taking they took. They left our ship with a few men on board, weaklings and wounded, who'd no chance of bringing her to port, all smashed up as she was. The captain was one: he'd a wife and children in Gades, and I've seen to it that they don't starve; the eldest son is a

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buyer in my up-country business now. But we others were stowed away among bales and benches in the hold of the pirates' ship, which was half-decked over, and left there for a time, wondering what would happen.

Suddenly two barbarians came trampling in and pulled me out; I thought it might be to death, so I hitched my blanket toga-fashion over my shoulder, and said a prayer. The sun was still warm though it was near evening, and there was a slight wind which sent us lopping along with no need for rowers. They dragged me up forward, jabbering at me all the time, across the benches and under the curve of the main-sail. We stopped in the shadow of it and looked up to the foredeck, that was in sunlight still. The chief of the pirates was lying there on a pile of cushions and spare sails; he was a big, youngish man, very bright-eyed, with long hair and a thick beard, and great strong hands; he wore a red shirt and breeches, heavy gold on his neck and arms, and round brooches set with coarse uncut stones. One arm was wounded and two women knelt on the deck, binding it up; the young one turned and stared at me. She was too big altogether for a girl, but fine-looking — oh, very! — fair and ruddy, with a silk snood over her long hair, dressed in bright colours, with rings on both hands; but her feet were bare, and smaller than they might have been. The other woman was quite old and never looked up.

The man began questioning me in very bad Latin;

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he could not understand one word in three of my answers, though I made them as plain as possible. At last he called impatiently to a boy who was sitting right up in the prow mending a sail; he jumped to his feet and came down, looking from his chief to me, and then began interpreting. His Latin was good enough, in fact he used ridiculously bookish words from time to time. He was a tall, well-made lad, dressed in rough hempen stuff, like most of the pirates, but plainly not one of them: for one thing his hair was short, and his hands were used to touching small, fine things.

I offered them a good ransom; there are times when it's worse than useless bargaining. The difficulty was how to get it, this being so late in the year; I wanted them to put in somewhere, send a letter to the nearest place where our name would be known, and wait for the answer; but they were afraid of being caught in the November storms, so they'd only send it and come back with me in the spring to take delivery of the gold. Nothing I said made any difference. I shrugged my shoulders, and asked them to give me back my tablets which they had taken.

I was trying to write that letter in the corner of a bench; my hand was none too steady, and the ship rolled and recovered, and rolled again all the time. I had to give what directions I could for carrying on the business until I came back — if I ever did. Yes, I'd got to thinking that. It was getting dark too. As I finished I saw the interpreter lad come up to me; he

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brought me clothes, saying my blanket would come in usefully that winter: it made me shiver!

He went on: 'This'll be my second winter: I know.' 'You're not one of them?' I asked. 'No,' he said, 'I'm from Gaul, near Lugudunum: you've been there, perhaps? Well, it's a sharp and bitter wind blows down the Rhone valley in January, but it's a May breeze to the north-easters where we're going!' I began to talk about Lugudunum, praising it for a fine city, though I've only been there once, and then I was cheated over a deal; but I wanted to make a friend of the lad. By and bye I got his story out of him.

He was half Gaul and half Burgundian – and a citizen of course! Now, that's what I call foolish: they ought to draw a line somewhere. As for the Gaulish part, well and good; but most likely the Burgundian grandfather was as much of a murderous savage as one of these pirates. His father and mother being dead, he lived with an elderly cousin, a very decent, quiet sort of man, I should say, with a small estate up the river from Lugudunum. Well, when he was sixteen, his cousin naturally hoped to see him settled soon, and being of a religious turn of mind, and the boy having no great fortune, wished him to become a deacon (which is not a bad way of living comfortably when there are women about). But the boy had no love for the Church and refused, thought he would rather be a soldier. His guardian would have none of this, though, and grew more and more bent on making a priest of the boy, partly, perhaps, to atone for an old

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sin of his own. So he locks him up in a high room, on bread and water: the boy knots sheets, climbs down, and runs off as pleased as a wild colt. He lives by his wits from town to town, working, stealing, fighting with other boys, the barbarian half of him laughing at it all. By and bye he gets to the coast, sees a village on fire and a fight going on, butts into it, gets wounded and carried away by the pirates.

Well, that was more than he bargained for. He wrote off to his guardian for ransom, begging to be forgiven, even said he'd be a priest after all. Then the answer came: his guardian was dead and a distant relative whom he'd never seen had come into the property and naturally didn't wish another heir: so no ransom. 'I wanted to kill myself then,' said the lad, 'but they were kind to me, Gylfi, and Siggi, the sister who sails with him. They took me back with them, and now — well, I'd sooner be here than singing psalms all day.'

We talked a lot after that; no doubt he was glad to see a Christian again. All that long, cold voyage back he helped me and got me things, and stayed by me when I was sick. Arrhonius, he said his name was: not a good name at all: a nasty barbarian sound about it. But I liked him all the same; sometimes I doubt if I'd have got through that winter without him. I was sorry for him too; my eldest son was the same age — he's in the East now, doing well for himself — and I couldn't help thinking of all he'd got and this boy had missed: a good home and education, good

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examples always before him, prosperity without extravagance – but, Lord, it all depends on what foundation you build: a family like ours, citizens for ten generations back, that's firm! But this young Arrhonius, he'd never had a chance, half a savage like he was. All the same I made up my mind to do what I could for him: I offered to ransom him and make him a clerk in my business.

You can't imagine the life one led that winter: the cold! It must be a desolate country even in summer, away there in the north-east; and for five months in the year it's snow-bound, white or grey according to the weather, till one's eyes ache with it. The pirate chief, Gylfi, lived in the middle of the snow in a great wooden hall, painted red and black, and most of his men lived there too, sleeping all round on the benches. Arrhonius and I had a corner to ourselves, though sometimes he'd go off to the others instead; he got straw and elk-hides for our bed and a basin to wash in with melted snow-water. At night with the doors barred the place got warmer, but by day the wind used to blow through and through, whirling fine snow like sand, and scatter the rushes on the floor. Sometimes I had to cut wood for hours to keep myself from getting chilled to the bone. The roast meat was never hot, and they had no wine, nothing but their horrible mead, that smelt of bitter herbs; with my profession I always felt that was the last straw.

Three or four times there were feasts, once for the girl Siggi's betrothal, when two of the barbarians

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from near by fought for her and she sat looking on and enjoying it. They all got drunk then and rolled about on the floor like hogs: disgusting! The women weren't much better. Then at New Year they sacrificed a white horse to one of their gods, Woden, or some such name. Of course I kept well away from even the smell of it, hoping that my dear old mother would be praying for me; and I found when I got back that she'd been on her knees in church for three hours that very day: there's a coincidence for you. But it did shock me to find Arrhonius had slipped out and was sacrificing and drinking with the rest: this for a boy who might have been going into the Church! He was repentant afterwards when I'd spoken to him for some time; I only hope it was sincere.

Gylfi and Siggi were both very friendly to him; Siggi and he used to play ball together all up and down the hall. The more I looked at her the prettier I thought her; it came across my mind more than once what a sum she'd fetch, in Italy say, where there's quite a fashion for these big, fair, smooth-skinned women. But I did my best to talk sensibly with the lad and make him acquainted with the business, which is not as simple as you might think. He'd no notion at all of keeping accounts, and I taught him, using slips of birch bark to write on; and all wasted: well, well!

But the winter came to an end at last, the ship was tarred and rigged and we all went aboard, Siggi as well; her brother was afraid to leave her alone, with

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all the other savage chiefs round about after her. It was rough weather the first fortnight, but it was astonishing how little I cared! Only I began to be anxious about the ransom: suppose my letter had gone astray – At last we sighted the bay. Arrhonius was standing by me, looking out at it under his hand. ‘Here we are, my boy,’ I said, ‘back to the Empire and civilization; don’t be afraid, I shan’t forget my promises – and don’t you forget how to cast accounts!’ He’d got quite good at them by then. But he didn’t answer at once; he stood fingering the belt Gylfi had given him a few days before. Suddenly he threw back his head: ‘No!’ he stammered, ‘I – I thank you, but I think it’s as bad being a clerk as a deacon!’ I was so taken aback I couldn’t speak; he went red – as well he might – and hurried off to help let down the anchor-stone. And believe it or not, that was all the thanks I got, for he kept out of my way, dodging me all round the ship till everything was finished and they were rowing me in.

I slept that night in a fisherman’s hut, or tried to sleep, for I had all the news of six months to think over; and besides I couldn’t help thinking of all my good money in that pirate ship. They wouldn’t even know how to use it; it would be made into cups, sword-hilts, necklaces! I felt I’d got no value for it! My life and liberty? Well, I didn’t look at it that way. I hadn’t even saved that boy Arrhonius. But I got something for it in the end after all: it was this way. We were all ready to start, my servants and I, when

I'M A BUSINESS MAN

I saw a boat putting out from the ship, which was still anchored in the bay. I waited. It was Siggi and the old nurse, come to gather herbs. The men stayed by the boat; the women came nearer us, down over the sand-dunes, out of hearing. Well, we got them. We set spurs to our horses and off to the nearest strong town; then we were safe.

Of course, I couldn't sell her for anything near my own ransom; she wasn't worth all that, and besides, I didn't want her on my hands longer than necessary: it wasn't pleasant. But still it meant that my good money wasn't wasted altogether.

THE KONUNG OF WHITE WALLS

Dedicated in affectionate admiration to Doug by one
of the many millions he has never even kissed.

RUSSIA

EARLY ELEVENTH CENTURY

THEY stayed all that winter in and about the steading by the river, and most of March as well, for the ice broke up suddenly with a good deal of noise, and then there were floods for miles along the far side: water knee-deep and very cold, and the ground soggy and treacherous below it. But the floods dried off quickly in April, with flowers opening almost before the quick-growing grass was over the level of the red mud that had been left by the river. The girl at the farm was going to have a baby, so Sveneld left a gold bracelet with her mother. When the horses had got a week's good grazing on the new stuff, they went south-east again. Still there were no hills, only the grass plains and flat rivers, and sometimes low, tangled woods where they always smelt and sometimes saw bears and wolves.

By and bye they had a fight with some small, beardless, chattering men with bows and arrows, who stuck feathers in their hair, and Ari the Fisher, who had

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been leader of the Varangs, was killed. Before he died, he called for Sveneld, who was nearest kin to him of them all, and gave him half the coin that was hung round his neck. He said: 'You will find the girl with the other half,' and then he coughed blood, while Sveneld hung the coin round his own neck, and he said again: 'I lay it on you, Sveneld, if she be maid, marry her. If she be slave, free her. If she be wife or widow, do what is best for the hour.' At first it seemed as if he would lief have said more, and he coughed again, and tried to speak twice, but his voice was drowning. Then he seemed content with what he had said already and stayed quiet, with his eyes on Sveneld, until he died. Sveneld killed four of the small, beardless men, and took the blue stones out of their belts and wrapped them in a piece of leather and put them at the bottom of his saddle-bag. Then they went on. Sveneld asked all the others if they knew why Ari the Fisher had worn that coin round his neck, but none of them had dared to ask him, for he had been an angry-minded man. Perhaps it had been given him by a fairy.

By this time Sveneld could speak Russian well enough for food or love or war. By and bye they came to a walled city with a river coming out from between high towers in the wall, and more towers with painted windows like eyes, and roofs, sharp-tiled or round, showing above. At first it seemed like other cities they had seen, but as they got nearer it seemed to unfold on slight rises and hollows, so that soon they

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knew it for bigger than any of last year's cities. They were all eager to get in behind those walls, to all the wonders and marvels, the food and wine, and smooth, gentle women that must be hidden inside.

They rode up slowly, with Sveneld and old Ingolf, who was leader now, half a bow-shot ahead. They looked in through the gates, and there was a straight street with low, white houses at each side of it that had red and blue doors and doves in wicker cages hanging on poles out of the windows. The guards crossed spears in front of them. 'Who are you?' they said, 'and do you come for peace or war?' Sveneld answered: 'We are Varangs and we come for peace with good pay. What is this city's name, and who is your prince?' They said: 'This is White Walls, and our Prince is Bracislav of the Talking Bow, and our Princess is Theophano the Very Beautiful, grand-niece of the great Emperor.' Said Sveneld quickly, without a word to old Ingolf: 'Tell your Prince we would take service with him.' So the guards let them in to White Walls, and they rode up to the market, where there were booths and folk selling white squirrel-skins and buying summer-coloured woven silk, or selling honey and resin and slaves and tame bear-cubs, and buying wine and oil in painted jars. At the far end of the market was a white castle with wooden balconies and red pillars; at one side was a temple and at the other side a church. But Sveneld did not understand that for a long time. For he was a man who did not have much need for Gods.

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Prince Bracislav came out of the castle with a long robe of striped fur and a bow in his hand. He said he would hire the Varangs to guard White Walls and follow him to all his wars. They should have a hundred squirrel-skins and twenty bear-skins and as much bread and meat and butter and honey and sweet foreign wine as their bellies could hold. So Sveneld looked about him and grumbled in a loud voice to Ingolf, and they stood solidly in the market, bargaining with the prince, while the Varangs bought things or got them without buying, and made bear love to the market-girls, and quarrelled with the men all across the square behind them.

Sveneld heard a little laugh in the air and looked up, and there in a balcony above him, and just to one side, was a lady dressed all in gold with a crown of dangling stones on her head and more necklaces than he had fingers on both hands. All round her were maids in green and scarlet long dresses, who leant over and laughed together till his ears buzzed and his heart thumped, and he tossed his heavy war-axe into the air and caught it again. So in not much less than an hour he agreed the bargain with Prince Bracislav of the Talking Bow, and Ingolf must needs agree too.

They lived in the hall under the east tower of the castle, with bed-places all round for the Varangs, and leather curtains to make all cosy for their women. But Ingolf and Sveneld and three others slept in little rooms off the dais with slot windows and wooden doors that could be barred. Here too were any

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treasures the Varangs took, and their squirrel and bear-skins. They went out three times during the early summer on raids with Prince Bracislav, twice to drive back the bad men who came out of the East on horses, and could not speak any tongue that the most travelled knew, and once to put down a rising at the far end of the Prince's land. None of them were killed, and they always had a great feast afterwards. The Prince was a crafty man, a good leader, and he knew how to use rivers and marshes and the fear of the tangly woods against his enemies. He had a long beard and he wore a high pointed helmet, so that he looked very tall. Both this helmet and his shield had cutting teeth from some great fish cunningly fastened into them. He had three hundred horses stabled round the court of the castle, and a third of them were always kept saddled and bridled.

There were always women in the castle, running up and down the stairs or clustering together round the windows playing games; they brought in baskets full of meadow flowers and flung them about when they were tired of them, for the slave-girls to sweep up in the cold dawn next morning. Theophano the Very Beautiful, the Greek Princess, never seem to care who looked at her, or how. Sveneld wanted to see her lift her skirts and run, for she looked well made about the body, but she never did: she swayed across the hall, laughing at every one, in long dresses of gold and red, woven in panels from neck to toe with tulips and flapping eagles. She wore a veil under her crown, but

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it was such fine stuff that it did not hide her hair, that was blue-black and looked well with golden combs in it or loops of rubies, and she never tried to hide her face or the tight curls round her forehead. She painted her lips and round her eyes, and pencilled her eyebrows, which she kept very narrow and arched; but she did not paint her cheeks, because she liked their heavy, elegant cream colour. She wore a great many thick rings, so that when Sveneld got her hand and squeezed it he felt more cold stones than warm flesh. When she stopped laughing and talked, she spoke very fast and badly, giggling at the Russian words, so that Sveneld was hard put to it to know what she said. Almost all her maids seemed to be Greeks too, small and pouting and dark, mostly, with their hair done high like hers, and those long straight dresses that hardly let you see what sort of breasts and hips they had underneath. They were not to be hurried unless they chose, and it was a long time before any of the Varangs got within more than just kissing distance. None of them talked Russian any better than their mistress did, till at last Sveneld found a slave-girl belonging to one of them who spoke it well enough, but a little oddly, and then one day suddenly brought out a round dozen words in his own tongue.

They were behind one of the pillars in the courtyard and he was giving her a lump of amber, as big as her fist, with a spider caught in it, for Theophano the Very Beautiful. He had bought it in the market from

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one of the summer traders, and he was trying to tell her that Theophano was the clever spider that caught all the little flies and laughed at them, but let her be wary! — the golden flowing stuff from the North loved the spider and was going to eat her up. She was to say all this to the princess. The amber weighed light between her hands and his. She was a pretty girl with bright eyes and a snub nose, and her hair in curly wisps on to her cheeks; every now and then she blew the wisps away with a sideways breath, screwing up her face; the wisps were quite fair and her cheeks pink and firm. Sveneld pinched one to make sure. She ducked her head past his: 'If I say that, the Very Beautiful will be angry with me.'

'Well, honey-duck,' said Sveneld, 'the next shining thing shall be for you.'

'Yes,' said the girl, 'but she'll have me whipped. She does.' She rubbed one foot on the other; her dress come only half-way to her ankles and her arms were bare.

'No, she won't,' said Sveneld, but he felt a little angry that Theophano should do that.

'She likes it,' said the girl, and then: 'she watches it herself.'

Sveneld said: 'Well, you shall have your shining stone to-morrow.'

The girl took a breath and said: 'I want something now.'

'Little greedy!' said Sveneld, 'take this then!' And he kissed her on the mouth.

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She didn't push him away but held on round his shoulder with her free hand. 'That was it,' she said.

Sveneld was pleased. 'If you're having more,' he said, 'come to-night. I'll stay at the bottom of the hall – no one'll dare say a word – my bed's got fine sheets and curtains we can wrap round and a little lamp inside, enough to see you by – and you me, lass –'

But she stepped back and held on to the pillar and looked at him, and grinned a little: 'No, no,' she said, 'not yet. I'll take the message, Konung Sveneld. Maybe you'll have better in your bed one night.'

Sveneld was still pleased. 'I'm not Konung yet, but maybe you're not far wrong,' he said. 'Tell me, chuck, what do they call you?'

'Why,' she said, 'I'm Anna Maria.' And then she said in their own tongue, softly: 'But I had a better name once, before they took me to – to church.' This last she said in Greek because she did not know any other word. Then she blushed, which she had not done when he kissed her.

Theophano always took his presents if she liked them, and sometimes sent him back messages; but very often they seemed as if they might have meant something else if he had only understood them properly. She and her women went on giggling at the Varangs, but between times she would look at him softly and drop rather worthless things, like flowers and ribbons, for him to pick up and smell. Most days he, or Ingolf at any rate, and usually two or three

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others, sat at Prince Bracislav's high table and talked of battles and hunting with him and the nobles of his druzina. The Greek Princess sat at Bracislav's right side; her chair was a hand's breadth higher than his, with a double-headed eagle on the purple cloth that hung over the back, but even with her piled hair and crown that did not raise her above the Prince, because he was very long in the body and always sat upright, even when he was drunk. They all paid great honour to her, since she was the Emperor's grand-niece. Her maids stood behind her with little dishes of sweet herbs to burn, or in May and June flowering branches; when she wished to hear them sing everyone else had to be silent on pain of frowns from the Prince. None of the men cared for the Greek women's songs, so sometimes Theophano would make them go on for an hour, just for the pleasure of seeing everyone else fidget and make faces. Afterwards she and her maids mimicked them, shaking with laughter up in their sunny, windy tower. She always rose to go out of the hall with them before the drinking had gone on long; then the only women left were the Russian slave-girls, who lifted their short skirts and sat on the men's knees.

But until she went, one after another the nobles of the druzina came up to do honour to her, kneeling on one knee till she chose to bid them rise. One day she bade Ingolf come to her, and he stayed stiffly and unwillingly on his knee, while she talked to him in her high voice and played with her pet squirrel. Sveneld

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thought she was looking his way and could hardly wait to ask his old companion what she had said, and whether it was anything about himself. 'Yes,' said Ingolf, 'she says you are to be a Christian and get yourself a new name in church.' 'Aha!' said Sveneld, 'like Anna Maria,' and for a moment he wondered what the slave-girl's first name had been. Then he said: 'Was that all?' 'Wasn't it enough?' said Ingolf, and spat into the rushes. He disliked the idea, but Sveneld rather liked it. Almost all the druzina – all the younger men – were Christians, and of course the Prince was. Princess Theophano had brought priests with her when she came north, and one of them had been made bishop; he held masses in the new church, and those who went took care to wear their best clothes and behave becomingly. Most of them made their serfs go and be baptized, after harvest and before ploughing, when they were not wanted on the land.

A few days after that Theophano sent for Sveneld, and he got up and knelt and kissed her hand from wrist to finger. He got closer to her than was usual too, and Prince Bracislav frowned a little. She said, would he be baptized, and he answered so eagerly that he would, that she laughed out loud. 'Why,' she said, 'you will be the best Christian of them all! You will have to go to Jerusalem like my pretty Raymond!'

'Who was that?' said Sveneld quickly, catching jealously at a little softness he thought was in her voice.

'Oh,' said she, 'when I was a girl three or four

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handsome yellow-haired barbarians like you, Sveneld, came to Constantinople to seek their fortunes. They were all such good Christians and we all admired them dreadfully. Raymond came out of Burgundy, where all the handsomest men live.' She threw back her head and laughed till Sveneld nearly bit her leg. 'Oh, I did like him! His eyes were rather like yours, Varang, and oh what a rider! But that was a long time ago, when I was a little girl and didn't know what to look for in a man.'

'What do you look for now, Princess?' said Sveneld angrily.

'Oh,' she said, 'now I'm married and an old, old woman. Why should I do any looking?'

'You are looking at me,' said Sveneld.

She lay back in her chair and said: 'That is because I am going to be your godmother when you are baptized.' Then she called her house priest, who was standing back among the women, to come and talk seriously to Sveneld; the Varang went back to his place, sulking, and the priest stood and exhorted him and dodged the greasy bones he threw back as he finished them. Theophano the Very Beautiful seemed to be tittering again; he got quite plain in his head what he meant to do to her one day.

The next week he and a few of the Varangs got baptized, and a few days later some more, but Ingolf managed to excuse himself one way or another. Some of them got terribly excited and would not touch women for weeks after that, and two of them brought

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their wenches to church and were married to them. The Princess was godmother to Sveneld, and wore a thicker veil than usual and a great gold cross on her breast, and kissed him with annoying coldness on the forehead. That was all he got for a long time.

One day the Prince's sister came down-stream from the smaller town that stood at their northern border on the same long river. She stayed in her rooms for a day while bales and bundles were unpacked; then there were new curtains at the windows patterned with eyes in silver thread. After that she sat on Bracislav's left hand with her women behind her. But they kept quiet. She was called Volodara, and sometimes the Blue Swan; she liked sailing on the river and pulling up the long stems of the water-lilies. There were other things she liked that people found it best not to talk about, and she did not go to church except for the greatest festivals, or when there was too much talk and her brother made her go. She had her hair in plaits, oily and much scented, and her eyes were pale blue and flat, as the eyes of white horses sometimes are. But her furs were finer and softer than any that Theophano had.

Sveneld was angry at having to wait so long and get so little from the Very Beautiful. He was not used to it and he was very young still; he got even angrier when Ingolf told him that Bracislav was displeased and he was putting them all into danger. So, partly to cool his own anger, and partly to please Ingolf, he tried to get Anna Maria instead. At first it had always

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been she who took messages. But later one of the Greek maids used to come instead, an ugly, merry little thing called Casia. He asked her what had happened to Anna Maria. First she wouldn't say, and then, when he had jigged and petted her for a long time, she told, between titters, how, after one of these errands, Theophano suddenly lost her temper and got Anna Maria, who was kneeling at her feet, by the hair, and dragged her about the room and banged her face against table legs, and how Anna Maria had screeched, and how her real mistress, who was one of the other maids-in-waiting, begged the Princess to stop, and at last had to call the house priest in, and even then Theophano had Anna Maria whipped for a slut by one of her black men. 'And you can see the marks still,' said Casia. 'She is a devil when she's roused, the Very Beautiful, but then everyone isn't a real Princess, and such a colour she got with it all — you ought to have seen!'

But Sveneld did not like women to hurt other women, at least not when there was no fault. That was a man's game. And he did not like it that Anna Maria was a slave. He asked Casia to take a message to Anna Maria, and at first she didn't dare, said the girl was in disgrace, and she couldn't be seen talking to her, but later, with a little promising from Sveneld, she agreed. Part of the message was to ask what Anna Maria's other name was. Sveneld had been called David at his baptism, and he had been rather angry when he found out later that David was a little man

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and had beaten his enemy, not fairly, hand to hand, as a Varang should, but craftily, without sword-play. So no one ever called him David.

The day after Casia came back with a present from Princess Theophano for her godson, a cross to wear round his neck. He was pleased at first, and then he said, trying it with his thumb: 'But it is not gold!'

Casia laughed till he had to kiss her quiet. 'It comes from Constantinople,' she said, with her face in his tickly beard, 'and it was blessed by the Patriarch himself! What does it matter if it's brass or gold, you lovely great heathen!'

'Brass cross, brass kiss,' said Sveneld.

'I've another message for you,' said Casia, 'not from her,' and she looked up, trying to see his eyes. 'The one whose name you don't like says she'll be drawing water this evening, and she'll wait after the others are gone.'

'Where?'

'Oh, *you* know!' said Casia, 'all you Varangs know where the girls go to draw water!'

So that evening Sveneld went down to the river and waited behind a boat-shed. The slave-girls came down with their jars and waded out thigh-deep to fill them in the current beyond the muddy edge of the river. Most of the Russians were knock-kneed, but Anna Maria had straight, long legs. She was not used to the cold mud and tucked up her skirts distastefully; it was only since the Princess had been so angry that they had sent her off to this. She sat down on the bank

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beside her full pitchers and waited till the other girls had gone. She was less fidgety than a girl waiting for a man usually is. Sveneld came and sat beside her and put an arm round her waist; her dress was splashed with water in places. He said: 'I haven't seen you for a long, long time,'

She said: 'The Very Beautiful was pleased not to wish it.'

He said: 'She is the Very Cruel too. Let me see if you are marked.'

She jerked her shoulder away. 'Let my dress be. You can take my word I am marked, Konung Sveneld.'

He said: 'It is better to see for oneself. I do not think it will have spoilt you, Anna Maria. Well, if you won't let me see your back, there's more of you I'd sooner see. Let the grass see your pretty back, Anna Maria. When I was waiting by the boat-shed I saw how thick the summer grass was. Behind the little thorn hedge, Anna Maria. Leave your jars here; we'll find them afterwards.'

Anna Maria was standing shoulder to shoulder with him, touching but not looking at him. As he moved, so did she, a step or two towards the boat-shed. She did not feel the chill of the water any longer. Then she turned and put a finger on his neck. For a moment they stayed like that. 'My name was Linngerda,' she said.

'That is a name of my people,' he said, but not very surprisedly, or really much interested now in anything so vague about her as her name.

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She frowned and shivered a little. 'My name - ' she said, 'my name - I thought - ' And then suddenly she bolted back to her water jars and began running with them, clumsily, spilling the water and coming down heavily on to the earth path with her bare feet.

Sveneld caught her up. 'I like your name!' he said, 'come back and talk about it, if that's your fancy. Come back, come close! Anna Maria - Linngerda - you must come!' He stood in front of her and then snatched one of the jars from her, cleverly, without spilling.

She held the other in front of her with both hands and stared at his eyes across it. 'I won't!' she said sharply, 'I won't be whipped again!'

Helaid his hands, too, on the round jar. 'Poor lamb, he said, 'don't be frightened. She won't know.'

'She will, she will!' said the girl, 'she'll smell you on me! She's got eyes like a cat and a nose like a dog! Sveneld, you don't want me whipped!'

Sveneld considered a moment; it was not plain whether he wanted her now, whipped, or later, not whipped. But pity had it, and he stepped back and let her go past, with nothing but a friendly pat on the shoulder. Pity would surely not have to wait too long!

The next day riders came into White Walls with trumpets of brass and ivory. All the Varangs came running out of the castle to look. The riders had come all the way from the Great Emperor, Theophano's grand-uncle, who lived in a purple and gold palace in the middle of the world, with magicians and elephants

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and fire-breathing ships to guard him, and they came to summon Prince Bracislav of the Talking Bow to the Emperor's wars with the heathen yellow people who come out of the East and use poisoned arrows.

Now it was late in the year and no time for wars, but the Emperor bade him come, nevertheless, and join the gathering of the great army. The riders brought this message and also had stories to tell Bracislav of how he would spend that winter, not less joyously nor magnificently than the Emperor's own sons: eating from gold, drinking from jade, and seeing the great shows and games, men and women and fabulous wild beasts, in the great shining hippodrome that was itself one of the five wonders of the world. So Bracislav made a great feast for the Greek riders, and sent for all the nobles of the druzina, and the chiefs of the Varangs too. He came in when almost all were seated and beginning to be impatient; he had been talking with the druzina. Volodara was on his left side and Theophano on the right, with the chief of the Greeks, Michael Rangabé, a young cousin of her own, beyond her. They talked fast in Greek, laughing, and Sveneld thought she was pointing at him. He cut into the edge of the table with his knife and wished it was Michael Rangabé's throat.

In the middle of the feast Prince Bracislav rose and the trumpets sounded for silence. He announced the summons of the most great and Christian Emperor, and called on his druzina to follow him, and then called on Ingolf to bring half of the Varangs. Then

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he summoned Sveneld by his name David, and bade him swear to guard White Walls and the Princess Theophano, his godmother, with the other half of the Varangs. So very joyfully Sveneld swore to do this, and Theophano said nothing and looked at no one. Then Bracislav said: 'And in token of my faith and trust in you I give you to wife my sister Volodara, and married you shall be this day that is coming.' Then Theophano looked up and round very softly, and very thinly glanced from under her eyelids at Volodara. But Volodara still looked in front of her with her blank, blue-grey eyes. And Sveneld began to say that the honour was too great for him, and then he thought better of it and humbly thanked Prince Bracislav, and then stood up and went over to the bride and took her unsmiling face between his hands and kissed her. Everyone shouted for quite a long time, and at the end of it Volodara reached forward to the table and took one of the little loaves of white bread and dipped it first in honey and then in salt, and broke it and took half herself and gave the other half to Sveneld, who ate it with a rather dry mouth. He did not know, but feared, what it meant. Theophano was watching them now with her eyes wide open and her mouth too, but so was everyone else. Then Sveneld went back to his place and spent the rest of the evening discussing with Ingolf which of the Varangs he should take and which should be left in White Walls.

Before they went, the Prince called Sveneld up again and told him he should have the river tower of

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the castle to live in with his wife. There was a fine hall there, and bowers, and a built-up terrace along the river with thickets of sunflowers growing on it, some in flower and some in seed. He might bring four of the Varangs with him, but the rest should stay in their own place. He went back very gloomily with Ingolf and told him what had happened. 'I am not frightened of wolves or battles or drowning,' said Sveneld, 'and the Gods know I have never been afraid of a woman yet! But I am afraid of something now, and I wish I could see what like of thing it was. And I wish I knew what made the Prince do this.'

Said old Ingolf, unbuckling his sword-belt and pulling off his boots, 'I know.' And he grunted a little with stooping, though he was still as good a man as ever in the war play. He said: 'The Prince is guarding his apples: not one for you! Volodara is a witch — oh, I am touching steel, she will not hear me! I have known of women like that in the North, so why not here too? They can draw men and cast them away; they can take the milk from the mothers and the sap from the trees; some of them can walk through fire and some will not drown. If they are good witches they can make the sky rain cakes and raspberries, but I have only heard of one good witch and she was killed by a thunder-bolt five and twenty years ago. She cured my aunt of warts. But bad witches (who are no worse, after all, than any other women, but only have the power as well as the will), bad witches will know if their man goes to another woman's bed and they will

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make the sheets cling wetly to him and the pillow slide down slippery and cold into his arms. Yes, and if it is in the open, they will make ants and beetles come out of the ground and sting him or prickly leaves suddenly stab him in the soft parts. It is better for that man to be faithful. I am sorry for you, Sveneld. What was she like to kiss?’

Sveneld said: ‘She was as cold as a dog’s nose and as harsh as sour milk, and her eyes are like frozen skim-milk too!’

‘Perhaps she won’t be as bad as that all over,’ said the older man, but not very hopefully.

‘Do you think she can truly do these things to me?’ asked Sveneld.

‘If I were you, I wouldn’t dare so much as look at the Princess’s window.’

‘And – Anna Maria? I wish I’d had her yesterday! I could have – there was no one about and that hedge behind the boat-shed so thick and green! And then I was sorry for her, like a fool, and waited. I thought there was all the rest of the summer to come.’ Sveneld began to bang about the room and kick the chest and the legs of his bed. Ingolf watched him sympathetically, sometimes grunting or saying a few words, till he got sleepy and stopped.

The next morning the Bishop married Sveneld and Volodara in the church, with singing and incense and running up and down and lighting of candles, and blessings in Greek and Russian. Volodara was veiled from head to foot in thin gold veils, and looked softer

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and more like any other woman so. She had a crown, but Theophano had a bigger crown and a very stiff dress of purple and silver, much like the Mother of God who stood over the altar had. After that there was a feast with music that lasted until dark. Michael Rangabé sat next Theophano again, but Sveneld had not the heart even to think of being angry with him.

There had never been a woman whose bed Sveneld would sooner have kept out of, but he and Volodara drank the wedding cup of hot wine together and things went not too badly. All the same, he said good-bye cheerlessly enough to Ingolf and the rest of the Varangs. Theophano wept too when she said good-bye to her husband, and her maids all wept for envy of the men who were going to see Constantinople and the warm lands where vines grew, and the blue sea full of eyed and busy ships again. Prince Bracislav rode out of White Walls with the Talking Bow in his hand; he smiled secretly, and made his horse prance and toss its head for the bridle-bells to ring and be a good omen. So they went south, and half of the Varangs with them, and the other half ate the remains of the wedding feast, and drank what was left of the Russian mead and Greek wine.

Things went on very quietly and the weather was hot and the days shortened, and Theophano bade the Bishop make prayers for the Prince and his men. The only place where Sveneld dared even to look at her was in church, for he thought the witch could not hurt him there. But Anna Maria was scarcely ever

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in church, and now there were no messages and no presents. During these long prayers he was able to think and picture a great many things, but he could not see when they would be possible. Sometimes he thought he would simply get away out of White Walls, wandering again, with his half of the men; but he was always stopped, partly by his oath and partly because he wanted to see Ingolf and the rest of the Varangs. And sometimes he felt a curious and consoling pride in that the witch at least belonged to him, was his wife. He had never owned anything so strange before.

One day he was sitting at meat with Volodara beside him, neither of them saying anything, when a man came up through the hall and stood in front of him. The man was tall and loosely made, with reddish hair and a shade of red in his eyes like a fox's. He was well enough clothed in fine yellow woollen stuff, with boots and cloak, and all arms a fighting-man should have, but in a fashion somehow a little strange. He said: 'I am Yuri. I am a landless man, but not swordless nor skill-less. I would take service with you for a time, Sveneld the Varang.'

'Where do you come from?' asked Sveneld.

'Why,' said the man, 'I come from Marob on the edge of the sea that is between here and Constantinople, but it has been twice burnt by the heathens out of the East, and now a third time, and for my part I am tired of building it up again, and tired of hasty harvests and frightened sowings, and scared men and white-faced

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women, and no joy nor gaiety in Marob. So I sold my farm to the first buyer and away I came to seek my fortune, to find the life I like in some other place.'

So Sveneld took Yuri into his service, and watched him, and saw that he was quick and clever and good at seeing the truth of things; and often he came up to the high table and spoke boldly and merrily with Sveneld and Volodara. Sveneld liked him better than most of his own Varangs, for he was always thinking of new things and his songs were neither love-songs nor sad. Now it began to be late autumn and colder, and there was much rain, and fog came out of the river and spread over the land and through the streets of White Walls up to the higher windows of most houses; but the four towers of the castle stood out from it. The corn harvest and fruit harvest were in, and no more merchants came along the river from south or north, and there was no more news.

After a time Sveneld got less frightened and again began sending messages to the Greek Princess, though very cautiously at first, and speaking a word to her now and then in the church porch, for after all he was her godson, and for the little way that went, the Bishop should be able to protect him against his wife. Theophano's dresses were always of fine, shiny stuff, at her fancy clinging or heavily stiffened, with jewels sewn about their edges and dripping from their sleeves; he felt warm looking at them. Her crisp hair was piled with combs and nets and diadems, and her ear-rings flashed and span colours at him, and her

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hands moved quickly and her bracelets tinkled, and even her shoes were gold or painted bright over the leather. When she had passed the air was full of scent for minutes, so that he could shut his eyes and think she was close to him. He hated Volodara's dull-feeling woollen dresses, and her cold, heavy furs; he hated her lank plaits, and her pale face with cold duck-ponds of eyes in it; and he hated her cold, still hands that he had seen once taking skeins of fog and weaving them into some pattern that would clearly have been as unholy to the house priest as it was to him, and well might have been to the thin old priests who still made spring and autumn sacrifices before the neglected idols of Dazbog and Khors.

In the Prince's absence he was master of the town taxes and guards and dues. He could take first pick of merchandise; fathers of marriageable daughters brought him the touch-gold out of the dowries; he took his tenth of the yearlings at the November horse fair; squirrel furs and lumps of resin and forest amber were brought to him in flat wicker baskets, shoulder-high down the lighted hall. But it was all for Prince Bracislav; and for a long time Sveneld put it honestly aside in the treasure-rooms, taking only what was perishable, or occasionally making the gifts that Bracislav himself might have made, though perhaps his own men might get a little more than their share. But every week it irked him more and more; and it was only because he thought Volodara was looking at him all the time that he went on.

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One day at the beginning of winter, Sveneld walked across the terrace of the river tower, knocking aside the dry sunflower stalks and white tufts of ungrazed grass heads. He stood by the parapet wall, looking down at the water. The river curved towards him here, but further along he could see the spit of land with the boat-sheds where the slave-girls went down to fill their jars in summer. There was nothing there now but two goats. Yuri, the landless man from Marob, followed him out of the castle. They looked at one another for a time without speaking; the oppression of winter and the closing darkness lay on both of them. Then Yuri said: 'Do you know what I would do if I were you, Sveneld the Varang?'

Sveneld said: 'No.'

Yuri said: 'If I were you, Sveneld the Varang, I would not wait any longer, for now it is winter and the Prince will not come back this year, nor will he hear any tidings from here until after the ice has come and gone.'

Sveneld held on to the parapet wall and said: 'What would you have me do?'

Yuri said: 'Here are your Varangs, and the town guards do not hate you, at least not those at the gates. You should say there is news that Prince Bracislav of the Talking Bow is dead, and take possession. You should be Konung of White Walls.'

Sveneld said: 'What good would that do me? I see nothing but hurt in it, Yuri the Landless, besides the pledging of my word to Prince Bracislav!'

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Yuri said: 'The good I see in it for you is twofold. First, you will get all the taxes and market dues and fear gifts for yourself, and second, you will get Theophano the Very Beautiful.'

Sveneld looked very bitterly at Yuri, and spoke low: 'As for the first, Bracislav will come back with the druzina and all his army and I shall have to flee, leaving the gold. And as for the second, as you well know I am married to his sister.'

Yuri laughed a little and said: 'You will have many weeks, perhaps many months, to enjoy both these things.'

But Sveneld half drew his sword and took a step towards Yuri: 'Do you stop saying this, ay, and take it back, or she will hear!'

'Which she?' said Yuri.

'Volodara, my wife,' said Sveneld, and muttered something that might well have been a curse.

'Do you stop cursing Volodara, then,' said Yuri, 'for I love her, and she me; and if you do this you shall be Konung and have Theophano, and I will have what I think the better thing, and that is Volodara.'

Then Sveneld could hardly speak for a moment. At last he said: 'You and my woman lovers! What does she see in you, landless, kinless Redhead, better than in me?'

But Yuri said gently: 'The Blue Swan lights on the mud of the reedy islet to nest, and leaves the palace garden alone.'

Then Sveneld looked at him and looked at him,

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and after a time he began laughing, first to himself and then aloud. He said: 'Are you speaking truth?'

And Yuri said: 'Ask her.'

So they both went back through the rattling sunflower stalks into the tower, where already the maids were lighting lamps and torches, and they came to Volodara's bower, where she sat among her women sewing red and blue squares of stuff on to a cloak of martens' skins. Yuri said: 'I have told Sveneld that you and I are lovers.'

She said: 'That is true,' and went on sewing, and her women went on sewing.

'I knew nothing of it!' said Sveneld. 'And I have been faithful to you, and you are my wife, given to me in the church by your brother!'

But she did not even answer him.

Then Sveneld said to Yuri: 'You are a bold man to take a witch woman like that for your sweetheart!'

Volodara said: 'That is one reason why I love him. He is perhaps a bolder man than any of you, Sveneld.'

Yuri and Sveneld found themselves making plans together. Sometimes Sveneld was happy, as only a man just set free can be happy; then he thought of Yuri as his brother and almost loved Volodara. And sometimes he was suddenly and violently angry with Yuri and thought of him only as a thief. But Yuri was always gay and full of new schemes. The question was not whether he could take White Walls now, for that was easy enough, but whether he would be able to keep it after Prince Bracislav came back. He

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knew that Ingolf and the rest of the Varangs would not willingly fight against him, yet they might be hard put to it to do anything else, unless he could secretly get a message to them first. Even so, the two bands together were far outnumbered by Bracislav and his army. Still, that was all a long way ahead – probably. And he did not bother to send any more messages or presents to Theophano. There would be no need of that! He did not even think of her much, now that it was sure. He thought more about Anna Maria.

So the morning came, and Sveneld, considering the evening, put on his best coat and breeches of red cloth stitched with yellow and trimmed at the edges and up the seams with white squirrel. It was a sunny, gay day, and there was cat ice already at the edges of the river. Yuri and some of the cleverer of the others had been down in the market, and there were rumours spreading about the Prince – that a messenger had come – that there had been a disaster – that White Walls must be prepared to defend itself against the heathen – that Sveneld would take command – and so on. But these stories had not reached the women at the castle yet, and were not meant to, because they would know the truth. Or would they – would some of them – accept the lie? It didn't matter much anyway.

Yuri was to lead one-half of the Varangs; they had accepted him gladly for his wits and his merry tongue, and his skill with sword and axe. Sveneld had the other half. Some of them went to the walls and took

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the gates and gate towers; the guards sometimes defended themselves and sometimes took the story about Bracislav as an excuse not to. But almost everywhere it was easy. Then there were the posts along the river, which were harder, because they were commanded by one of the druzina who had been left, an oldish, stubborn man who had always spoken ill of the Varangs; half the soldiers were his own serfs. Here there was real fighting, with some killed on both sides, and much anger. Sveneld took the old man prisoner, and when he would not acknowledge him as Konung or the Varangs for masters of the Russians, he cut the blood eagle out of him, and he died. Then there was the castle, and Sveneld ran there with the smell of blood in his mouth, leaping and shouting.

The Varangs' tower and his own tower were safe, and they took the north tower where the grain and hides were. By now it was near sunset. But the castle guards, who were the loyalest and best of his men that Bracislav had left, and who did not believe any of the stories, massed round the door of the women's tower and kept the Varangs off. Sveneld was angry again; he had hoped for some treachery here at least. But the Greek Princess and a dozen of her maids ran out on to the wooden balcony above their heads and began screaming and spitting at them and cheering on their own men. Sveneld tingled all over when he saw her up there. 'Get ready!' he said, 'get ready for me! I'll not be long!' 'Dirty tow-head!' she screamed, 'fat pig of a heathen! My brave guards will take you prisoner

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and I'll put your eyes out with my own bodkin! Oh, I'll prick you well, I'll get that ready for you!' But Sveneld shouted back at her: 'It's I who'll do the pricking, my little sucking-pig! Get into bed and turn the sheets down – I shan't wait!' And he shot an arrow just clear of the women's heads into the room behind. Theophano gave a screech and the men laughed, but then the women threw pails of slops at them, and though he didn't get much himself, he was so angry that he charged the guards, and he and his men got through with some loss. He was scratched himself, but no more.

Then there were the doors, but they rammed against the hinges and broke them in with a harsh, hungry noise of splintering. Then Sveneld and a dozen of his men were into the bower, with the women running like rabbits and knocking into one another. Casia ran bang into his arms, squeaking, and seemed inclined to stay there, but he shoved her at one of his men and went on after his own game. She tried to stab him with a little jewelled knife, then fought him with feet and nails for half a minute, then suddenly stopped and began to laugh, not wildly as he'd heard them sometimes, but with her old, maddening, provocative giggle. He held on to both her wrists in case, though, and shouted at his own men to stop. The room was crowding up with them now, and all the guards below were down or prisoners. Then he pointed at the covey of women, clinging on to curtains or one another, facing him straight or over their shoulders.

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'You!' he said, 'such of you as are true maidens can go to the little bower and pray; no one will hurt you against your will. But such of you as are women shall stay here and make a merry time of it for my men. And I know for sure that this will be most of you, so if those that are no maids go with the others, it will be the worse for you all!'

The women said nothing to him, but there was an immediate stir of whispers and fidgets, and some of them, mostly the very young or the very old, slipped out with their hands at their mouths or pulling their dresses straight about them. Theophano turned so that she could see it all; she was very much interested. Sveneld let go her wrists and just held her, gently but firmly, round the shoulders.

It took a minute or two. Three of the prettier women tried to go, but were held or pushed back by the others. Theophano looked hard at them all, one after another; some of them blushed and winced, and some of them looked away, but none of them dared really stare her back. She felt Sveneld's fingers come creeping over her shoulders, feeling for her breasts; she leant a little against him. Two of the slave-girls went last, among the maidens, Anna Maria the outside one and nearest the men. Sveneld caught her eye, and she his. She hung back, looking at him. Suddenly she said, in a shrill, jumping voice that was meant to be soft but that they heard all over the room: 'I am a true maid, yet I would stay here, Sveneld, but not for any of your men!'

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Everybody laughed, even Theophano, who might have been angry, and Sveneld laughed loudest. 'Stay you shall!' he said, and turned round to the men. 'Let her alone, even if she asks for it! Now, is everything dealt with?'

Yuri spoke from the back of the crowd: 'All safe. We shall do till morning. I'll wake you myself if need comes, Sveneld! — or let your wife!' Then Yuri disappeared again down the stairs.

Then the Varangs let loose, and the two crowds, men and women, were very thoroughly mixed. In a few minutes there was still a good deal of noise of one sort or another, mostly cheerful enough, but reasonably quiet on the raised step under the windows. Theophano the Very Beautiful was in her own soft and magnificent bed with purple and gold cords and curtains, and the very finest possible sheets. And Sveneld was there too. It did not bother her at all that her dress was torn and one of her necklaces snapt and scattered, because she had plenty more. It did not bother her that he was her godson: that was all a long time ago, and besides, no one could say this was her will, so it must be God's, and therefore there was nothing to do but accept it. She sighed and panted and sweated with pleasure; she bit Sveneld's ear with her little sharp cat teeth.

After some time she fell into gulfs of delicious exhaustion and undreaming sleep. Sveneld had slept quicker, but woke sooner. He saw the loose amethysts lying in little pools beside her and picked them

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up and made them trickle down her breasts on to her white belly; she wriggled a little, but did not wake. He shifted over to the edge of the bed and looked out. The hall was as full of rustlings and whisperings as a half-roused hen-roost. He saw someone standing against the window with the moonlight behind her. He stretched himself slowly and very pleasantly, limb by limb, and found himself all the better for the evening's work. 'Anna Maria!' he called softly, and she came. He pulled her inside the curtains; she looked at Theophano, then sideways at him. He grinned back and drew the sheet right up over the princess, covering her eyes; and still she slept. He turned to take Anna Maria on his knee and undress her, as he had thought of doing very often, but she was stepping out of her dress already. He nodded and slid a hand up her strong thigh; she was more shame-faced about her shift, but he helped her. Then each saw at the same time that the other had half a coin that they had their own halves of. Said Sveneld: 'What was your father's name?'

'Ari,' she said, 'Ari the Fisher - I was stolen -' And she trembled a great deal.

'Well,' said Sveneld, 'he said if you were slave to free you, and that I'll do. If you were woman, to do what was best for the hour, and that I'm doing.'

'And if I was maid?' said she, very low.

'Why,' he said, 'that's not worth the saying, for you will not be in less than the time he took saying it!'

So through that winter things went on very well

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for Sveneld and Yuri, and the women did not complain, at least not more than usual. Volodara, in fact, seemed gayer than she ever had been, and sang to herself, rather tunelessly, about the castle. She was with child already, but neither of the others were yet. Now that Sveneld was Konung of White Walls, the Varangs had the best possible time of it. There was nothing in the town they could not have or do. Many of them could not picture Constantinople itself as any better than this. And Sveneld had Theophano and Anna Maria both, as well as any other women he might take a fancy to, which he had not thought possible a very little time ago. He put nothing by for Prince Bracislav, but instead broke into all his treasure-rooms. He did justice well enough and kept good order in the town; he thought of a new law to make in spring about the salmon-fishing. He hunted with hounds or hawks over the frosted ground. He drank and sang and lorded it over the Russians, and when he rode through the streets of White Walls everyone ran out crying: 'Konung! Konung!' Some times he made Theophano and Anna Maria dress in one another's clothes, which they did not like, though Anna Maria was pleased at having fine dresses and jewels and serving-girls of her own. Once when he was angry with the Princess, he told Anna Maria that now it was her turn, and she could have Theophano whipped if she chose. But Anna Maria did not choose, and when he had stopped being angry Sveneld was glad about that.

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Ice held fast on the river for a long winter; then there was rain and it grew sodden and at last began to break up again with great rumblings and cracklings that they could hear even during the feasts in the hall. All the pine forests dripped, and there was a wetness about everything; but soon there grew a sweetness among the wetness and that was the flowers beginning. Anna Maria loved flowers; she made herself wreaths and girdles of them and became more alive every spring. She flung herself at Sveneld and kissed him like a March wind and he kissed her back like a hungry bear, and they laughed and laughed. But mostly the Varangs had moved from their quarters in spring; it was their custom to settle in towns or steadings during winter, but they seldom stayed two years in the same place, or not, at least, a body of them together. One or two might drop out every move and take to a wife and farming, but most would go on, and when there were only a few of them left it was ill luck if they did not strike another band they could join to. So it was many of them got restless now. Yet plainly they might never come on such a chance again. They could not tell whether there was more pleasure to be got by going or staying. Sveneld was restless too. Not that he wanted to go, but still there was something he knew he had not got, and whatever it was he could not seem to find it in White Walls.

About this time Sveneld established a string of posts from White Walls to the southern boundaries

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to bring him news of the Prince's return. Though, if no bad news got to him, he would not naturally come back until autumn: the Emperor would need him for a summer campaign. But almost certainly he would hear from somebody or another as soon as either land-ways or water-ways were open. And this was just how it happened, though not till well on in spring when the larch woods were bright with young sweet-smelling leaves and rosy cones, and the cherry woods lovelier still, and the new cornfields like green fur on the soft and rippling beast that was the April land. Most days Sveneld had ridden afield, often alone, letting it in through eyes and mouth and nostrils, by ears too, as the shrill, leaping larks rose all round him as he rode. He came back to White Walls late, in the end of the long evenings. It was on one of these dusks that he met the news that Prince Bracislav was only a day's march from the town walls.

The man had been at the castle an hour before Sveneld had come in; he had told it all to Yuri, and eaten and drunk since the telling. He was an odd little man called Gzak, a heathen, and an amazing rider. When he had told, Sveneld said: 'Now you must get through a message somehow to Ingolf and the Varangs there.'

But Gzak said: 'Ingolf is dead; he died of eating sea snails with the Emperor. Rogvar is leader now.'

Sveneld said: 'Rogvar has hated me ever since I got his girl three years ago. He will turn the others against me too.' And he looked at Yuri.

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'I see,' said Yuri, and for a time seemed not to have a plan. Sveneld stood and grieved about Ingolf, who had been a good friend to him for many years.

'The Prince is marching fast,' said Gzak, 'he will be here to-morrow and when the town knows for certain that he is not dead - '

'And when the Very Beautiful knows her husband is coming back and will certainly hear what she did last, but not what she did before - ' said Yuri.

'My Varangs will stand by me,' said Sveneld, but very doubtfully.

Gzak said: 'One marches faster in spring. One does not get so tired. Every mile is new.'

Sveneld said: 'We could take the jewels in saddlebags, and some of the gold.'

Yuri said: 'Your Varangs will follow you there. But we've not too much time to lose. Send for them now!'

So Sveneld sent for them all into the great hall and barred the doors and told them; almost all shouted that he must take them away; they could not hold White Walls against the Prince and Rogvar. Sveneld thought of green larch and birken woods and the paths through them starry with white and blue, and the silky leaves on the branches brushing against a rider's forehead or shoulders. He was tired of streets and markets and being Konung of White Walls. He said: 'We start an hour before dawn. Get all the gold you can lay hands on. Take your girls if they'll come, but not unless, for we'll need to go fast.' One of the

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Varangs shouted up: 'No Greeks then!' And Sveneld answered, smiling: 'Not for me.' So they all cheered for him, and then rushed out to get their arms and horses, and anything else they were going to take.

Sveneld went over to the women's tower. Anna Maria and two or three other girls were making little cakes; they were all laughing vastly at the funny shapes they had managed to get the dough into. When she saw him Anna Maria ran up with her hands and arms all floury: 'You musn't look till they're baked!' she said.

Sveneld said: 'You'll never see them baked, my girl! Linngerda, I'm going away from White Walls and I want you with me.'

'Out over the river?' she asked softly, 'right away? And we'll never come back!'

'Yes,' said Sveneld.

She said: 'Theophano won't go with you?' He nodded. 'Only me. Sveneld, you can marry me to-night, before we go, and that's more than you'll ever do with her!'

'There's no time!' he said, astonished. 'We must leave before dawn.'

She said: 'You must make time.' And left it at that.

He went on to Theophano's room, vaulted and gilt, inlaid with brass and lapis, hung with peacock-patterned tapestries that had come from Constantinople or farther still. She was leaning back in her chair, eating the last of the dried apricots her mother had sent her the year before, and Casia was standing at a

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desk, reading aloud from the life of Saint Hippo-marina, who had worked the most fascinating miracles. She offered Sveneld an apricot. 'I've heard the news,' she said, 'so you needn't tell me.'

'Well?' said Sveneld.

'It really seemed time,' said the Greek Princess. 'As your godmother I quite approve of your going. Oh yes, and take Anna Maria if you like: she'll enjoy the ride, I'm sure.' She leant on her elbow and laughed at him once more. 'What they'll say when I write home! Such adventures! You may kiss my hand, Sveneld, before you go.'

And so he did, because it was very difficult to think of anything to say that was at all what he meant, and he had plenty of other things to do.

It was well after midnight before the horses were loaded and ready, and longer before all the Varangs were assembled and counted over by name. Yuri came out of the river tower. 'Will you lead?' said Sveneld, 'and I'll take the rear in case he follows us.'

But Yuri seemed curiously undecided. He said: 'I must see what Volodara wishes. She is not certain yet.'

'Take her if you must,' said Sveneld, 'or else leave her! But we have to have you.'

Yuri said: 'Make another leader, Sveneld. I think she will not come. And start your men. You can follow with Anna Maria on the fastest of the horses.'

Sveneld stared at him, but did what he said: chose the leader and bade the men start from White Walls;

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he would be with them in an hour somewhere on the forest path towards the ford of the nine cherry trees.

He saw them off through the creeping, astonished streets and made sure that they meant the same path that he did. There was the half of a moon, enough to move by. In the middle they had a dozen pack-loads of treasure, and there were a few girls with them, riding astride. He went back to the castle, shouting for Anna Maria. She did not come, and when he went to the bower, there she was in her very best dress and a veil he could not see her through, and there was an altar put up against the wall with flowers and cups and candles and the ikon over it, and there was the house priest, looking very much frightened. He began to protest, but Anna Maria spoke from under her veil and what she said was: 'This, or I don't come, Sveneld!' So the priest read out a divorce between Sveneld and Volodara his wife, since Volodara was proved a heathen witch and adulteress; he could scarcely hold the parchment for the shaking of his hands, and he kept on glancing towards the bride; but she stayed perfectly still, listening to him. Then he married the two of them as shortly as possible. When it was over Anna Maria threw back her veil and kissed Sveneld. She was very pink, but it was not for shame or joy, but because of the talk she had given the house priest just before. Then she ran down the stairs towards the court of the castle and the horses, undoing her dress as she ran. By the door she shook herself right out of it and there she was in woollen coat

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and breeches, ready to ride. One of the maids came running after her with the little cakes hot from the oven. She stuffed them into her coat and mounted, and looked round for Sveneld, but he was still at the door, talking quickly and urgently to Yuri, pulling him towards the horses.

Gzak, the little rider, came scurrying up to them: 'The Prince will be here in an hour! He's pressing on ahead with the Five Hundred Archers! Off, Konung, off!'

Sveneld cried out: 'Oh, Yuri, leave her and come!'

But Yuri said: 'She bears my child; I will not leave her!'

Then Volodara herself leaned out of an upper window and said: 'By the North Star and the Blue Swan, my brother shall not get him!'

And Anna Maria cried out sharply and drove spurs into her horse. He started in one clattering, whinnying bound, out of the court of the castle, under the hollow gate and across the market of White Walls. So Sveneld must needs leave Yuri and Volodara and follow her. They galloped out of White Walls on the track of the others, and across the river, and over fields and through dripping, dawn-wet woods. They found the Varangs at sunrise by the ford of the nine cherry trees, and broke bread there. Anna Maria brought the little cakes, still warm, out of the breast of her coat, smiling a little. So on again, through woods and wild grasslands, till they were out of reach of any vengeance from Prince Bracislav of the Talking Bow.

THE KONUNG OF WHITE WALLS

Now when the Prince reached the southern gate of White Walls, all hot and sleepless with hate, Volodara his sister and Yuri, the bold, landless man from Marob, stood on the parapet above the river hand in hand. It was all shimmering and sparkling with light, so that they could not see which was sparkle and which was water. But as Volodara spoke, the shimmer drew together into the shape of a boat with oars, and they leapt down into it, and Yuri took the oars and Volodara steered, and all the way up the river to whatever secret and lovely place it was that they reached, swans flew round them and over them, and none saw them going nor heard them singing and laughing on their way.

Out of the castle gates came a great procession. First went the bishop with his beard and crozier, after him went twenty priests, each carrying an ikon. The house priest was the only one who trembled. Then came Princess Theophano, the Very Beautiful, grand-niece of the Great Emperor himself, whose power Prince Bracislav more than ever feared, and her women about her, all in their very best and carrying baskets of flowers and golden ribbons to strew on the ground. After them such of the guards of White Walls as deemed it prudent to be seen. They met Prince Bracislav in the very middle of the market-place.

First he kissed the bishop's ring and then he kissed Theophano's lips, and then they went back to the castle and had a great feast. That night Theophano

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asked him a great many questions about Constantinople and all the wonders he had seen there. The palace and the great churches, and the Emperor's most especial treasures, the Veil, the Crown of Thorns, and that largest piece of the True Cross which was the envy of all other cities. He had seen and adored. And he had seen the long, live streets full of people – her friends – going in and out of the shops, meeting and talking. She wished he could have been cleverer at answering her, and given her a clearer picture of how it all was now, and whether the sun was really as bright and hot as she remembered. It would be four years at Easter since she had left home.

‘OH GAY ARE THE GARLANDS!’

CONSTANTINOPLE.

A.D. 1045.

IN Micklegard there was a garden of terraces and shaded walks; in that garden there was a house with barred and narrow windows towards the street, but high open galleries towards the garden; in that house there was a pleasant, sweet-smelling room.

Harald Hardrada and the girl who was called Anastasia were talking about death, which was a thing he had seen often and she but seldom. He was more interested in the facts than she was, regarding them as ordinary but curious happenings, about which he would like to know more. He sat on the stool by her feet, and every now and then he ran his hand disquietingly down her dress from knee to ankle. She could feel, with a terrible sensitiveness which she tried to disregard, the silk clinging and catching ever so little on the rough ends of his fingers. His broad, slightly ribbed nails were clean but cut too close; the stuff of them was thick and untransparent. He had gold bracelets and close, goldenish hairs on the pale skin directly over the muscles of his arms. He wore the full armour of a Captain of the Varangian Guard, and that was very fine indeed.

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The girl picked up her needle again and began to fill in with an olive-green the background to her embroidered saint. She did not like to think about bare, unrelated facts in a world of things just happening plainly without wisdom or a plan. She tried to show him life and death as she saw them from her own shelter, the centre of civilization, revolving as slowly as the hub of a wheel. One married and had children and grew old; then gradually this world lost interest for one, as how should it not, being a limited thing with colours only just more numerous, not always brighter, than the colours in her work-basket: never one quite new and uncomprehended by the imagination. She would not care to enter a convent now, it was not given her to be in any way different from the natural order of life; but as the world dropped away, so would the convent call her, as it had called her mother, to a few years of quiet and concentration on what was beyond, till at last the gate opened almost of itself, and the spirit passed through, naturally, gently. And to those fortunate enough to be in close communion with this fine and tenuous essence that, by accepting all, had become utterly transparent and fluid – nothing to catch and jar painfully as it passed through the threshold – to those it was granted to see a little way beyond, inwards as it were, to that Kingdom that encloses us and the temporal world as water in a vessel encloses crystals of salt. As the salt melts it becomes released into the water. Yet is every crystal marvellously preserved, as he shall see who

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heats the water again, for out of that turmoil and boiling the crystals re-form, more perfect than before the melting.

But Harald Hardrada did not see death like that. 'And the sinner?' he said, 'the strong man cut off in his folly?'

The girl Anastasia still drew her needle in and out. 'His soul has not accepted the ways of God,' she said. 'It has put up barriers, is coated with a hard crust of its own deeds and opinions. It cannot flow gently out of life. A sinner's death-bed must be terrible.'

'I have seen bad men die well,' said the Norseman, 'and good men hard, crying out for their mothers. I have seen those who were, I think, very good men, die in great pain of wounds a week old. How is that, Anastasia?'

'Two years ago my little sister died. For her, I do not understand. I cannot. I will not try to, for I know it is no use. I only try to understand for myself. I see it as a thing I must accept. I must cast down the barrier between myself and acceptance, must lay myself open to the way of God.'

'That I see,' said Harald, 'to be hammered as fine gold is. Yet' — he frowned — 'it is too easy. The only sure thing is the world I know, and that is full of marvels. How can I tire of it? I have seen camels and tigers and ostriches and the tame bears that dance in the square of Kieff. I have seen men who have seen dragons and centaurs and sea-unicorns. There must be many other wonderful things that no man at all

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has seen. He must needs have a hundred men's life-times to see them all. So how shall I die easily?'

'Oh, vanity!' she said, 'what do all these toys matter? You are a child, Harald.'

'That's as may be,' he said, 'but I tell you, my lass, I will not die a sheep's death! Now here is a story for you. There were some Vikings out of Jomsburg in Vendland made prisoner in Norway. They sat on a log with their feet tied and a man was going along cutting off their heads with a two-handed axe. You are not to screw up your pretty eyes, I have often cut off a man's head; it is easy enough if one knows how. So one of the Vikings says: "I have my cloak-pin in my hand and if I know anything after my head is off, I will stick it into the ground."'

'And did he?' said Anastasia, and her hands trembled a little.

'No,' said Harald, 'he dropped it. But that is how to find out about things.'

For some moments he sat staring down the length of the hall with his odd, light blue eyes. He clasped his hands round his knees and rocked himself. Then he turned and looked at her. At their end the room was raised on two steps and narrowed a little into a carpeted and tapestried bay, where two people could well sit and talk with all propriety yet not overheard and not too much overlooked by those in the body of the hall. There was one window, round and framed in a mosaic of gold and black; through it he saw first garden and then sea, all in an intense light that made

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blinding even the deep green of the great myrtles and oleanders, still more the thick and brilliant blue of the water beyond. There was so much of this light in the outer air flowing across and across the window that its pale and indirect side-streaming was enough to give the room a clear, pleasant atmosphere. Below, in the main part of the room, two maids, Anna and Sophy, were pleating a very wide plum-coloured petticoat that belonged to their mistress. Harald said: 'And have you found out about your Aunt Zoe?'

The girl, who was, after all, very young, stiffened and said: 'Our Gracious Empress - ' and then burst into tears. Her hand flopped limp to her side; Harald picked it up and began playing with it.

'Our Gracious Empress - ' he mimicked, half to make her laugh and half to amuse himself at her expense, 'our Gracious Empress is an old nanny-goat. Meh, meh, she says, and runs after the bucks with her stiff legs. Buck Roman dies in his bath - meh, meh, and before he's cold she's off to the next on Good Friday afternoon! Buck Michael's no use in spite of his pretty face, he doesn't last long, goes wobbling off to die in a sack-cloth! Meh, meh, here's another Buck Michael, a fine one straight from the docks, with tar on his rump - and butts her through the hedge at the end of it! Back she comes jumping into the Micklegard-field, with the yellow showing in her old eyes, and butts him out all bloody, with no eyes. Then she and sister-nanny Theodora have the field together to trot in without any bucks. She doesn't

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like that – meh, meh, here's Buck Constantine! But he's old, my dear, old, and besides he's got a nice long-haired bleater of his own – so here's nanny-Zoe looking out for another! But I'll not be a buck for her – shall I, my pretty kidling?'

Anastasia's eyes had gradually been filling with tears, her cheeks reddening. Suddenly she snatched her hand away. 'I won't have it!' she said, 'I won't!' Then, very low, 'Mother of God, is it my fault that I have to listen to you because the sound of your voice is sweeter than a Blessing to me! Go on, then, go on! But remember I am the Lady Anastasia Argyra, not one of your northern she-soldiers! Talk like this to that Elizabeth of yours, not to me!'

He pulled the hand down again and nipped it between his lips. 'My Elizabeth is a king's daughter and you are only a queen's niece. And she has twenty gold bracelets for every one of yours. And when I marry her there will be cakes and ale for all Kieff in the market-place. All the same –'

'All the same, why do you come here, why, why? If my father were alive still he would never have let you! Why do you come here and twist my poor heart about with your big hands?'

'Do you know that my great-great-grandfather, Harald Hairfair, who made himself king over all Norway, had eight wives? And my kinsman, Olaf Trygvesson, had four? I shall be king some day soon. Two is not many.'

'Be quiet! These heathen kings of yours –'

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'King Olaf Trygvesson was a better Christian than any of you. He took Christ's sword in his hand and killed all his enemies with it. He did not have all his wives at once. Some were in other countries. As you would be for King Harald Hardrada!'

She did not answer him, but looked, and at last stretched out her tight-crook'd fingers towards his head, drew back a moment, and then let them go to touch his hair. Because he wore it long, in great yellow she-plaits, it seemed to Anastasia less dangerous a caress than any on hands or face. Her fingertips knew exactly its texture and the shape of the strong bones under it. He in return leant his head against her thigh and looked up at her. She said: 'The Empress has not spoken of the matter again.'

He said: 'The guard are on duty every morning. It was better killing Turks in Jerusalem land. I am next the throne because I am captain. We must needs keep our eyes down, but he would be a fool who did not see through his eyelids how she looks at me! You had best say no more for a time.'

'No,' said the girl, 'let us go on talking about death, Harald.'

'I would rather make love to you,' he said, 'I am tired of this talk about death. You folk in Micklegard have too many dealings with the saints.'

She smiled a little: 'That's not for you to say, Harald, with your Saint Olaf!'

'Oh well,' he said, 'my own stepbrother is a

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different thing. He has helped me a great deal, one way and another, and he tells me new things to do when I have been long besieging a town. He was always friendly to me when I was a lad, and he was coming to see our mother at the stead, and so he is now he is dead. He was a crafty fighter in his time, though the Bonders killed him in the end with one belly wound and one neck wound. My banner, Landwaster, has been all the better for me since lying a week in his shrine, for now I have the victory wherever it is borne. And his son Magnus, though he was born out of wedlock, is a good lad, even if maybe he has got too proud and will need me to come and show him who is to be king next. But from all I can see, half your saints in Micklegard were old fools when they were alive, and are not much better now.'

She shook her head: 'Harald, Harald, do not say these things! Ah, you must go. Harald, I do not think the Empress will ever let us marry. If that is so we must accept it. If we were never to see one another again, all these days that we have had would still be lovely.'

'I am not sure that I choose to accept anything from her,' said Harald, 'except my lawful earnings. Other things I take! And I do not care much for the days that have been, but rather for days that are and days that will be.' He kissed her good-bye and walked through the long room. The maid Anna gave him the customary little nosegay of sweet basil and carnations; he took it in his large hand and smelt it.

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When he got outside he threw it away because he was not interested in flowers.

Then he made up his mind that it was time to go himself and ask the Empress Zoe for the hand of her niece; he wanted the thing settled. Haldor Snorri-son and Wolf Uspaksson who came to meet him agreed. He went to the palace and asked for an audience. Some people might have to wait half the day standing and whispering in large dreary rooms, but not the Captain of the Varangian Guard. He went striding softly along the corridors of the palace, observing who came to meet him and who went another way. He observed also the objects which he passed in the galleries, large things of gold and lapis lazuli and crystal and ivory, vases and caskets and crosses, table-tops inlaid with jewel-faced saints. When an Emperor died it was the privilege of the Varangians, his body-guard, to go through the palace and take what they liked. Constantine was oldish; the physicians were much about him. Last time when the Emperor Michael, Zoe's third husband, had died, Harald had not gone to work very skilfully, but had taken silver-gilt for gold and glass for rubies. He must learn better.

The carpets and hangings were mostly of the uniform, imperial purple, a trying colour. There were smooth-faced courtiers, like great dolls, mysteriously bowing and walking backwards, engaged in some curious ceremonial with one another and the image of Sacred Majesty that was forever in their heads. The ten ladies who had charge of the other Empress,

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Theodora's, most intimate wardrobe were standing against a wall in their straight, heavy tunics, embroidered all alike with processions of palm trees and ruby-eyed lions; they were waiting for something to occur. An oldish man in armour, just come from an interview with the Emperor, was praying violently and hurriedly before an ikon in a corner; he did this for two minutes, and then went on. Harald did not know whether it was supplication or thanksgiving.

Now he was come to the curtains of the Empress's inner room; they were of cloth of gold woven with stiff symbolic ducks and stags, the emblems of Christian faith and propaganda. They were parted from within and he came through. The Empress Zoe lay back on a wide couch heaped with cushions of blue and bluish-pink. To make it more imperial it was raised three steps and it ended in high golden scrolls. She was a broad, soft blonde; veils of light stuff hung and hovered about her; her white arms lay lax and empty along the cushions as though she had been scattering treasure. Her skin was a young woman's still; even her eyes scarcely showed her age.

Harald Hardrada took a deliberate deep breath of the warm, perfumed air of the room, and then swung up his two-handed axe in salute and crooked his knee in a slight gesture of prostration – the nearest the masters of the Court ceremonial could get to the real thing with a Varangian captain – and looked at the floor in formal deference. The Empress Zoe parted

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big red lips to smile at him. 'Well, my Captain?' she said. 'You have permission to speak freely.'

Harald looked up as far as etiquette permitted. The sight of the Empress was slightly distasteful to him; he was used to large blondes in his own country, but preferred them younger. He said: 'I am come to ask for the hand of the Gracious One's niece, Maria Anastasia Argyra.' Then he stopped and watched her.

She breathed heavily and seemed to heave and sway all over her body like some soft sea-beast rocked by the warm tide. She turned to her lady, Euphemia Xiphilin. 'But we can't give him that - can we? Oh no! Surely there is some other gift that our northern Hektor would wish to ask of us?'

'No,' said Harald, 'I have everything else I want. A million thanks,' he added, 'to the Most Serene Majesty.' And he waited, looking quite undisturbed.

The Empress Zoe sighed and fidgeted. 'Anything he asks,' she said, 'anything!'

Lady Euphemia Xiphilin looked from her to him, and crossed herself twice to drive the trembling out of her body. She was getting old; she could not be like the Empress with her marvellous skin at sixty, her great, lucid, un-ageing eyes. She would not be like the Empress if she could! She had been a faithful widow now for twenty years; she had kept to the rules, the pattern, God's gift to man to show him how at least to limit his pain and trouble. It was for that, perhaps, that the Empress chose to have her as a

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waiting-woman, someone fixed and certain – for surely, surely God's rules are certain! She wished to speak but dared not.

Harald Hardrada waited and thought of Anastasia. Then he thought of a new law he had decided to make if and when he went back to Norway as King, about trading with the Finns.

The Empress said: 'Maria Anastasia does not wish to marry. She is going into the convent of Saint Lazarus.'

'The Gracious One has perhaps not heard that Maria Anastasia has altered her wishes. She is eager now to betroth herself to me.'

'Eager – eager! What can a young girl know of eagerness and marriage? It is only a woman – a ripe woman – a woman who has known men – that can give love that is worth the taking!'

'It does not seem so to me,' said Harald Hardrada.

The Empress shifted about among her cushions, watching him. Now her white shoulders showed, now an ankle still shapely. He said nothing more. Suddenly she sat up with her fists clenched. 'Do you know,' she said, 'I have only to command, and you would never go outside my palace again? Your eyes would be pulled out and brought to me like fish on a green marble slab!'

'That would be the best of gifts for the Emperor,' said Harald calmly, 'when his Guards should take a good revenge for their Captain's eyes! Truly, the Gracious Majesty is wiser than that.'

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She relaxed again and laughed. 'I am not a fool, my Captain. But it seems you are. Go now, and do not speak to me any more of this.' She took a bracelet off her wrist; it was set with crystals and fat sapphires. She threw it at him and he caught it easily. 'Take this and turn it into gambling money if you choose, my barbarian! Leave me. I shall make a new scent and name it after you: breath of Harald. Death of Harald? Perhaps that has a better sound. But go!'

He went, carrying the bracelet; it was no use saying anything more yet. On his way he met the Emperor's charming and much-loved mistress, the August Sklerena, who smiled at him and, mockingly, at the bracelet. Her hair was freshly curled and she carried a copy of Homer in a silver binding. In the Guards' quarters he found Haldor Snorrisson playing the harp while the others stood round and listened. Haldor had got a great sword-cut on his face at one of the sieges in Sicily; it had left him wonderfully ugly, but he was the best of harpers. When Harald came in, Haldor in compliment to him began singing the song about his great - great - grandmother, Snowfair the witch, who had put an enchantment on Harald Hair-fair, so that even when she was many months dead he still kept her lying in his bed, for the red of her cheeks and the white of her throat did not change nor become corrupted.

They passed the harp round. Suddenly it grew dark and a coolish wind blew in. They lighted lamps, pulling up the wicks, recklessly using up good oil, for

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they all knew they had only to ask for more to get it. The harp came round to Harald, and he began to sing about the girl he was betrothed to in Russia, the fleecy-curved, mocking Elizabeth, daughter of King Jaroslav of Kieff, the light-foot twelve-year-old who would do nothing but laugh at his kisses! There was no comparison in his mind between her and Anastasia. Why compare horses with jewels, a spring morning with a cunningly won battle? Both were good. He would have both.

He woke early the next morning and began thinking about his kinsman, Magnus Olafsson, who was now King of Norway and Denmark. He thought it was nearly time he should go back and show his own claim to have the kingdom next, in peace or by force as the moment showed. By and bye he turned over in bed and saw that Haldor Snorrison was awake too, staring at the flies on the roof, with the red-rimmed sword-scar twisting and trenching his nose and sunken cheek. 'I have never seen an uglier face,' observed Harald. 'Like enough,' said Haldor, who by now did not care much about his scar, one way or the other. Harald went on: 'Yet I would sooner see it than most others.' 'If you are looking for advice out of it,' Haldor said, 'what I give you is this: the sooner we are out of Micklegard the better for all of us. If you can get your girl, well and good; but if you stay for her, maybe you will not get the kingdom so easily, nor even half of it.' Wolf Uspaksson said the same, though he loved Harald much and hoped

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he would get his own way yet with the maid Anastasia.

That day early, Harald went to the palace again, but this time he said he must see the Emperor Constantine. Again he did not have long to wait. The Emperor was sitting in half state. His throne had lion arms and in front of it was a square of purple carpet; no man might get nearer to him than the edge of it. He had a black beard, no less impressive for being dyed, and he was frowning a good deal. Someone had just put a letter into his hands. Harald Hardrada asked that he might now end his service as Captain of the Varangian Guard, since for the time being there was no war, and he had news from home of his kinsman Magnus, so that he would be glad to make the best of his way back as soon as might be. But the Emperor looked at the letter and said: 'I have news, too – that you have served me ill and shamefully over the moneys and goods taken in Sicily! I had thought at least you Northerners were honest!'

The councillors looked at one another; it was not usually wise to speak so to the Varangians – the thing must be true! Harald glared back and blushed; he was perhaps over-fond of money, like a good many of his countrymen, but, whoever else he may have cheated, he was honest with the Emperor, who had given them their pay duly, and had always been generous to the Guard over quarters and rations. 'That is a thing I have never had said to me, that I was a thief,' he said slowly.

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'It is proved,' said the Emperor, 'that and perhaps worse.' He crumpled the letter up in his hand and smoothed his beard. He was an image of gold and precious stones, but full of a lively anger. He was the Commander of the Roman Empire, the greatest and most powerful ruler in the world.

But Harald said: 'It was a liar who wrote that letter! Man or woman,' he added.

Then Constantine Monomachus showed his teeth a little and beckoned behind him. Twelve armed men came and took Harald Hardrada away to prison. On their way they stopped at the Guards' quarters and sent word in that they wished to speak with Haldor and Wolf; and they were taken to prison along with him.

It was no use their trying to do anything. They did not even speak much on the way in case the men who were hurrying them along should guess at anything there was in their minds. Wolf was walking beside Harald; he was very much upset and tried to show his sympathy by touching Harald's arm with his. He thought now, though it was not true, that he had been afraid of this for days. But Haldor walked behind and seemed much as usual. They had some little way to go through the streets; from what they could see of the people who stared at them there was a good deal of curiosity and quite a lot of pleasure; it was not often the citizens of Constantinople had the satisfaction of seeing any of the Emperor's big paid bullies getting dealt with in their own coin. Suddenly,

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Harald checked, stumbled against Wolf, and then went on again. Wolf looked sideways at him and saw that he seemed satisfied, and his mouth was beginning to shape as if he would whistle. 'What was it?' he whispered. Harald nodded at him and said: 'That was my half-brother, Olaf,' and he added, 'If he is as good as his word I will have a shrine built to him at that corner one day.'

So all three went along to prison with a little more hope. It was a queer place, and had perhaps once been something else; they were put there so that they should be alone, and far from where the rest of the Guard were, in case they came to hear of what had happened before doom had been given. It was a square brick tower in the middle of the houses, with an open top and no windows. There was just one door sunk a little below the street level, strips of bronze criss-crossing thickly over it. Inside there was a stone floor and the beginning of a staircase going up. But it came to an end about the tenth step, and all that was left were two or three fallen blocks that did to sit on. When it became plain that there was no immediate way of escape they sat on the blocks and tried to make out just why and how it had all happened. The more they argued about it, the worse they thought of the Greeks.

About noon the Empress Zoe had her bath of milk, with almond oil and honey of roses, which she had prepared herself, stirred into it. Then she lay naked on a couch while her very skilled Indian slaves

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massaged her; she looked with passionate interest at her great white body to see whether she was keeping the wrinkles still at bay. Then she had herself dressed in layers of flimsy rich silks, and bade her ladies come with her to visit her sister, the other Empress, and Mother of the People, Theodora, in the far wing of the palace.

She was carried there in a light, wide chair with cushions; she flung herself carelessly about in it so that the bearers were hard put to it not to stagger. Lady Euphemia Xiphilin was walking beside the chair with her hands clasped and her lips moving. She did not know about the letter. It was best that she should not know. She would not understand, no, not though she had seen Harald, had heard him scorning what he was — oh well, almost offered! Poor Theodora would not understand either; she never had; she had let life frighten her and dry her up: so foolishly. Never mind, the saints would understand, they would forgive her, not look at her with silly protesting eyes like Euphemia. And the dear Mother. Her thoughts flowed sweetly enough to a gift she was planning for her own birthday saint. Pearls. That great pearl called the Innocent. What had come of it? Perhaps Constantine had given it to the Sklerena. He must not do that, the people would not like it. Though, dear girl, she deserved pearls; but smaller ones.

They found Theodora in her room, surrounded by little tables and caskets where she kept her collection

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of foreign or ancient coins. She was dressed in heavy Imperial dresses which smelt rather stuffy, very unlike her sister's. 'You're looking no younger, my dear,' said Zoe. But little old Theodora only wanted to talk about her collections. By and bye Sklerena came in, to cheer them up with her kindness, her deference, the abundance of her life. No wonder Constantine was faithful to his mistress. She brought them boxes of sweets which she had over-seen the making of herself.

Suddenly, Zoe giggled a little. Yes, thought Sklerena, she is beginning to break up, poor old thing; and she spoke with infinite tact and gentleness to both of them. Zoe giggled again, she pulled Euphemia Xiphilin by the sleeve. 'Do you know what a little bird has told me?' she said. 'Our most Imperial and all-wise Constantine has fallen into a just wrath with the Captain of his Varangians and has sent him away to prison.'

Euphemia Xiphilin turned very white: 'His divine Majesty has found fault with – with Harald?'

'Yes,' said Zoe, 'perhaps he is going to have his head cut off! Wouldn't that be dreadful, his lovely white neck!' And she swayed about in her chair and turned to Sklerena and began to kiss her smooth young cheeks. It was queer how the old Empress's lips looked quite young too, but felt slack and withered and dry as though there were no flesh below the film of pink.

Sklerena smiled all the same, and half mechanically

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flashed bright eyes at the old lady. She was wondering what Zoe had done now, and, knowing what sort of thing to expect, began to connect her talk about Harald with the Emperor's anger. After a minute she slipped away and spoke to Euphemia Xiphilin, with everything put in as roundabout a way as possible, for who would like to say anything unpleasant about the dear Empress, the Mother of the State? Lady Euphemia dabbed at her eyes. That was it; but what could be done? She was helpless; so were they all.

Sklerena looked away, for a moment rather sad, and said: 'Well, she won't have much longer to get her will, poor thing. Holy Saints help us, it must be a terrible thing to be old!'

Terrible, yes, for Zoe, with her violent, passionate appetite for the things of youth which she had not had at the right time, but not terrible – not so very terrible, at least – for Euphemia, who had surrendered and accepted it. She stood there, feeling tired all over as she mostly did nowadays, and was sorry for the lovely Sklerena with age coming inevitably on to her, and did not know within how few months she would suddenly fall ill and die almost at once, before either of the two Empresses, and mourned by both of them.

So it went on at the palace. But Anastasia, too, was ill at ease. He had not come to her all that day. She was angry with the minutes for getting so into her mind, turning her fingers into a sewing clock. In the short hour between blazing afternoon and purple

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evening she walked in the garden and gathered flowers to make a nosegay; if he came he should have it; if not, well it was surely an innocent pleasure touching the silk of the petals, comparing the strong, warm, life-giving scents, uniting them into a harmony. He was perhaps on duty at the palace; or perhaps he had gone to one of the town women to get what he must not yet have from her; or perhaps he and his friends were just playing at something, like the children they all were, playing at some silly, violent game that ended in someone being hurt. If he ceased to love her it would not matter, because she would still love him. The thing would continue. Easy to say that!

The maid Sophy came fluttering through the dusk with a rumour that something had happened. He had been seen in the street, guarded. At least it was thought to be him. Anastasia shivered and came in and waited. She supped lightly: an omelette and some fruit and cakes. It was, strictly, a fast-day. Anna and Sophy took it in turns to read to her; to-night she had chosen the Pagan Aristotle. The two maids had been trained to read aloud in the ancient tongue, different enough from their spoken Greek of fourteen centuries later, but they did not understand much of it. Neither did she that night. She could not follow it with her mind, comparing it properly with the Christian fathers and ethics of the Church, as she had been taught to do almost from childhood: a game with rules, like chess. Then Lady Euphemia Xiphilin was announced.

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For five minutes the proprieties were gone through, food offered and refused, the health of the Empress discussed, neither of them showing that they were thinking of anything at all. Then Euphemia said: 'Our gracious Emperor has been pleased to imprison the Captain of his Varangians and two of the Guards; they are accused of mishandling such of the Imperial treasure as came to their hands. They are awaiting sentence now.'

'And that will be – murder?' said Anastasia very precisely. She looked at the older woman, and it was Euphemia who burst into tears.

'My dear,' she said, 'the Empress had a letter written – you know –'

The girl Anastasia said: 'I know. And I think my Aunt Zoe will not have an easy death-bed.' Her lips and chin began to tremble towards tears, though she stayed quite still.

Euphemia was shocked; she could not give an answer to such ill-wishing of the Empress! But she went on with the story: 'I have been with – her – all day. It is tiring for a woman as old as I am. I was leaning against the wall when suddenly the aching seemed to flow right out of my body and I felt a light that seemed to be half in the room and half behind my own eyes, so that I was dazzled. I saw a shape coming in the light, the shape of a helmeted head with bright quivering rays standing out all round it. It spoke to me, ringingly, ringingly, saying: "I am Saint Olaf, and I charge thee to bring my innocents out of bond-

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age." Then the brightness dimmed back into common air, but yet something was left, for my limbs are not tired any longer, and I can think of things as quickly as though I were a young girl again. I will dare to be the Empress's false messenger to the keeper of the Tower.'

Watching her, Anastasia believed everything. 'And then?'

'Then he must flee away, as the innocent have fled in times past.'

The girl took a deep breath and her slight shuddering rustled the stiff tunic from neck to knee, but she said nothing.

Euphemia Xiphilin went on: 'But I have thought of you as well! We will marry you to John Dobronas. I shall speak to-morrow to his father, the old general. Everything will be all right.' Still Anastasia could not speak: until she had beaten down enough barriers. 'Yes!' said the old woman again, leaning forward eagerly. 'What a man, that John, a young bull. Plenty of money, no sisters to worry you, the prettiest palace in the quarter! You'll say he's too young – oh no! Why, my dear, he spitted his lance through three Bulgarians in the last battle there! Well, well, what a man for a girl. And stiff hair like a young ram, and eyes – oh, like black fires!'

She stopped to see how it was going, and caught Anastasia's limp fingers in hers. The girl sat quiet but jerked her head about a little, trying to get away from the too clear vision of those other cold, blue,

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Norse eyes. She said: 'John Dobronas has an elder brother with no tongue. They were too good friends with the Emperor Michael.'

'Oh, that's all forgotten!' said Euphemia Xiphilin, jumping at the implied half-consent from Anastasia. 'Besides, anything of the sort would be considered in the arrangements. We should see that your money is secured to you in case of accidents. John himself would be the first to realise that. Unless' – she checked, and then went on in a rather different voice, – 'if you felt a call. No one would stop you, though there would be many to regret it. Anastasia – would you rather choose the convent?'

They looked at one another. Anastasia called down to her maids: 'Anna! Sophy! Bring me more candles!' During the time they took to spike the candles into the five-branched silver sticks, she did not answer Lady Euphemia. Then she said: 'No, I do not feel that yet. I cannot go out of life so quietly. In time, Euphemia, in time. But a convent gives too long hours for memory to stay peaceable. No. I accept your John. After all, even yesterday, I could see no future. What could we have done, he and I?'

'What, indeed!' said Lady Euphemia, 'Oh, my dear child, what a relief! Of course you are right. The Varangian would have gone back to his own barbarous kingdom sooner or later. It would have been impossible to follow him there, to cut yourself off from everything. Beyond Russia, even!'

'Oh yes, impossible.' Anastasia rose to trim the

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wick of one of the new candles. 'My steward shall make up the lists of my dowry and let you see them. I thank you from my heart, Lady Euphemial'

They said no more about it. The formal farewells were said. Anastasia did not even ask to know any more about the plan of escape. From now on that was ended. Soon she would be able to think calmly, even beautifully, of the past.

The night went on. Harald and Haldor and Wolf had spent the early part of it crouching under the broken stair, for the high full moon had covered up the mouth of the tower, and they did not care to sleep in its light, nor even in the light of the large southern stars. Later, though, they had stretched out and gone to sleep in spite of everything. Then there had been a creaking and muttering. Now they were out of prison and in the streets again.

The lady in the black cloak had whispered: 'Do not thank me, thank your Saint! It was his doing, not mine, Now you must fly, while there's yet time.' Then she and her two slaves had slipped into a house and the door had shut behind them, and the windows were all dark. When he first saw her Harald had thought for a moment that it was Anastasia, and the anger that had been steadily rising in his mind against the Greeks all fell away and left him like a child. But it was not Anastasia, and there was no Anastasia, and the anger rose again and made him go very silently and quickly between sleeping houses of the folk he hated.

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Wolf said to Haldor: 'I never thought we should get clear of that so well.' Haldor grunted and signed himself. 'Saint or not,' said Wolf, 'it is a queer thing that not one of us has his eyes out!' Then he said: 'Harald is looking very grim. I would not like to be the Greek, man or woman, who met him now. He will be thinking of his girl soon. I wonder what way he will think of her now!'

They got back to the Varangians' quarters, up a walnut tree and over a garden wall. The Guards were uneasy. They did not know quite what had happened to their Harald and his friends: they did not believe what anyone told them, and they had seen nothing themselves. Some were wandering about, talking and quarrelsome, others stood round the grindstones putting an edge on sword or axe, and in the main room a good many of them were keeping up their spirits by pounding on the floor with sticks and singing the earliest and simplest of the Varangian songs:

I went to Micklegard,
Micklegard,
Micklegard,
South – south – to Micklegard
And my name is Thorgrim Odd!

Then the three came in, and in a minute they had all rushed round, first shouting and then quiet, to hear what was to be done, and what vengeance to take on the Greeks.

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Harald Hardrada got all his own men together, though not all the Varangians, for some were English, some Russians, and so on. But there were two good ship-loads of his folk, Norwegians, Danes, Icelanders and Swedes, who had come south after the battle with the Bonders when Olaf the Saint was killed. Haldor Snorrison went down to the harbour with one lot to get their own ships ready and any provisions he could lay hands on. The rest got together the goods and money of all, as well as arms. Harald himself had sent most of his war treasure up to Kieff one time or another: King Jaroslav was keeping it safe for him and Elizabeth.

It was still night. He called Wolf Uspaksson and bade him take ten men and go up to Anastasia's house; by strength or by cunning he was to get her down to the harbour. At this Wolf frowned: 'Best would be,' he said, 'for you to do this yourself. Then she would be willing and a willing woman comes quick.' Harald said over his shoulder: 'The things that have to be done here are a great deal more difficult; and I am cleverer than you, Wolf. If the maid cannot be got, so much the worse.' Then he added, very roughly and yet in a way sadly too: 'It seems to me that any one man or woman is so much like another that it does not matter what comes to them or which one chooses for oneself. It is only the things that happen to them that are different at all. The Greeks are most like one another of all! Yet, I may as well have my pleasure, and I may as well show old

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Zoe I can snap my fingers in her face! You make haste, Wolf, or the sun will be up before you are done.' So Wolf and his men started off, making a plan as they went along.

In the early morning they all marched down to the harbour. Nobody was surprised or thought it his business to stop them, because it looked as if the Varangians were under orders again. They got aboard the two galleys safely and began pulling at the long oars; there was not enough wind to help them much. They kept alongside of one another, shouting across the water; how fine it was to be at sea again, doing no Emperor's bidding! Very few of them had yet begun to regret the pleasures of the great city or to remember any of the things they had left behind for good. Besides, Harald's anger was in their hearts too; they hated injustice, and he was their king, their leader in war and peace. No more Greeks!

In the galley's poop-house Lady Maria Anastasia Argyra sat on crimson cushions and watched the rowers. At first she had drawn the curtains close about her, but later that seemed pointless, and she had pulled them a little apart so that she could see out and breathe the fresh sea air. The maids had quieted down from screams to prayer. 'But oh — oh — what is going to happen to us?' sobbed Anna, and let the beads slip through her fingers. 'You have asked me that a hundred times,' said Anastasia, 'I did not know. I do not know now. We can do nothing but trust in God and our Saints.' She moved and stretched her

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bruised right arm; she had never felt violence before, even as a child: she had been a good and obedient little girl: dying, her mother said so. She supposed the violence had not been great, less painful anyhow than changing over from the state she had been in, the difficult but somehow maintained balance of hopes and fears which she had been having to face. She had not seen Harald yet, only Wolf, the Iclander, with his sun-reddened skin that turned white again under the edges of his bleached hair. She did not know if things would be the same or changed. She wondered how much she had ever known him.

Suddenly something began to happen. Every man who was not actually rowing had got his arms full of baggage and was hurrying along the gangway between the rowers' benches to the stern of the galley. Harald was shouting orders to them; they watched him and obeyed to the second. He was steering the galley himself and he seemed to feel with his body every movement she made. Anastasia kept her eyes on him from between the curtains of the poop-house, but he did not see her. What had happened was that the Emperor had at last heard what was going on and had ordered the chains to be put across the mouth of the Golden Horn, the chains that ordinarily were only there if an enemy attack was feared from the sea. Now it was to keep the Varangians in, like naughty children trying to run beyond the garden gates. At each end of the chain the guardships waited to laugh at the barbarians caught in the trap. So they

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had to get across. Harald had thought of the way.

With all the men and all the weight astern, the galleys rowed all out against the chains: no slaves or hired men at the oars, but free Norsemen born to the ships! Their bows were high out of the water; it made the steering queer, but Harald bit his teeth together and held her straight. There was a shout as they went over and a jarring grind on the keel and bottom planks as they came at last against the chains. The galley toppled horridly. She was no more a live, leaping thing, but dead and oppressive, every timber pressing unevenly on the next, straining to open seams, the great keel beam rubbed and groaning. Near the stern the water was almost up to the bulwarks; two or three little waves came walking gaily in. The women held their breaths and prayed; it was worse for them than for the men, who had the work to do. One word from Harald and the loaded ones ran forward; the toppling changed direction; with one great jerk the bows dropped, the stern came up, and they fell off the chain on to the far side, clumsily, half sideways and shipping more water than anyone liked, but at last safe.

They had time then to think of the sister galley. She had tried the same thing, but the keel had not stood the strain. Her back was broken and already the timbers were splitting out and the poor thing had wallowed over on to her side. A good many were drowned, but most could swim and were pulled

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aboard Harald's galley. There would have been time for the guardships to come up to them and try to stop them if they had dared to, but they did not. The rescued men piled in, dripping and swearing and laughing. There was a great crowd on board now and the galley went slowly. However, it was certain that the Emperor was not such a fool as to hinder them from getting off. They were too much of a wasps' nest.

While they went on rowing south through the straits, with all the palaces of Constantinople clear and tiny a mile off on the right hand, the hot afternoon wore through and the smell of sweat rose off the rowers and hung about in the windless air. Harald came along between the benches to the poop of the galley. Anastasia sat frozen, watching him come nearer and nearer, and it seemed that every step of his thumped on to her full heart, so that the hot dizzying blood rushed out into her face and hands. The maids were desperately quiet, on their knees. He came up the ladder: so quickly she had not time to think, so slowly she almost screamed with the suspense of waiting! He was in front of her. He came into the poop-house; the roof just cleared his head. Her eyes dropped from his, slowly down; she could only look at his big shoes, standing square on the boards. He took a step forward and laid his hands on her shoulders. As he touched her she quivered all over and then submitted, and an amazing wave of happiness flowed all over her, and her mind loosed

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its hold on her body, and gave it up to whatever was coming.

Anna and Sophy, still kneeling, shuffled close to each other and whispered: were they to stay and see the rape? Suddenly he was aware of them. 'Out!' he said, without even looking their way. So they went out and dared not even listen, but crept over to the side of the ship and watched the towers and high walls of the capital glowing rosily in the sloping light. The galley had turned west, skirting the coast; ahead of them there was a small fleet of fishing-boats, low in the water, pulling laboriously in, for there was scarcely any breeze to fill their set sails.

Harald Hardrada gradually leant all his weight against the girl's shoulders. She lay back on the crimson cushions and at last lifted her face again to look in his, her lips half parted to the smile of whatever joy she was to get from him at the end of all this trouble. She looked into the queer, distant eyes, as she had often done, and waited for them to come alive and kind and very gentle. He said: 'I have you now,' and she murmured yes, shivering in lovely fear of his cold voice, his strength, his power. She thought he would soon begin to kiss her, she thought he might tear her dress off, gripping the stuff between his two hands; down from her throat she began to be conscious of her body waiting for him under the hot weight of its silk and linen.

He said: 'The Empress of all the Greeks could not even keep her niece from me!' And he laughed and

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stuck his hand into her hair and shook her head about. She thought only that it would be nice to tell him later that it had hurt. He said: 'They told me that I was a thief — me, Harald Hardradal'

'I did not call you a thief,' said Anastasia. But she had meant to say it laughingly, and instead her voice had gone thin and little.

'It would not matter much to me if you had.'

He was looking at her, looking at her with those cold eyes, interested but unmoved! The two plaits of his hair rolled down over his shoulders on to her face. He tossed his head and swept them off; they were like snakes. She could not get the eyes to come alive, to be her Harald's eyes! This was the mood in which he had also been interested in death. Now it was she herself who was the curious fact. She realized that all the things she had heard of him were true. They had caught one of the Bonders who had killed King Olaf the Saint, in Russia, and had cut the blood eagle on his back. Harald had been there and seen it. She did not know at first what a blood eagle was. He told her you cut the ribs all off from the back bone, and bent them outwards like red wings and there were the heart and lungs, red too, and flopping, inside. When she knew that she could not believe he had really looked on himself, though they told her he had. He laughed at her, because they did plenty of unpleasant things in Constantinople, blindings mostly, with occasional croppings of tongues or ears. Quite often they were done in the Hippodrome in front of

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thousands of spectators, to a rebel general, for instance. And there was Zoe's first husband; both Harald and Anastasia knew what had happened to him on the day of his fall, when the mob got loose on him. She had not been able to answer that laughter, but now, now she could! The anger and revenge of Emperors, the hideous fury of a crowd which has seen some blood, and wants to see more, they were one thing and bad enough. But this cold northern curiosity, this interest that did not flare and pass, but was prepared to observe everything and then remember and reason about it, that was another! And she flinched and quivered and felt herself regarded by the man who had been Captain of the Varangian Guard. At last she had to speak, it was torn out of her. 'What are you going to do with me, Harald?' It was horrible how the tone of her words to him had changed already.

He said: 'Listen.'

So she listened. There were voices, but not much else. She shook her head, trying to read from him what it could be. Yes, there was something missing from the ship-sounds. She said: 'They have stopped rowing.'

He said: 'We are waiting for the fishing-boats to come by.'

'*Why?*'

'To take you home to Aunt Zoe. To tell her from me that she is an old fool who cannot stop me from doing whatever I choose.'

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She could not bear, so soon, to be tossed into another state of mind; she was not yet soft and fluent enough, not enough hammered to go easily through another change, into another form. She thought she would break. Somehow now, with the whole thing actual, escaped out of her mind to the real world, she could not get back to the calm into which she had got herself so painfully and hardly after that talk with Euphemia Xiphilin. He had let her go, and she moved her head wearily from side to side. She said: 'I am to go back – like this, Harald?'

He said: 'That is how I choose. Back to Greek-land.'

'Where are you going, Harald?'

'I am going to the girl who is betrothed to me, to Elizabeth in Kieff. And then I am going to my own land, to Norway, where I shall talk with my kinsman, Magnus Olafsson.' He stood in front of her with his arms hanging at his sides, dangling golden bracelets. He was even smiling a little.

Suddenly she screamed. It surprised her dreadfully to hear her own screaming voice come back to her, shut in by the walls and curtains of the poop-house. He did not move at all, even to put his hand over her mouth; he only just frowned, even that not much, a mere wrinkling of his thick eyebrows. After that one scream she was quite still and exhausted. It seemed a very long time that they looked at one another. Some sort of calm appeared, though not a durable one or anything she could count on. At last

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she sat up and began to pat her hair. She knew it would be best to forget quickly, and yet her body, in revolt, was clinging to the remembered touch, the weight of his body through his hands and against her shoulders. She tried to think away quickly, of anything – of anybody – else. She said: ‘Anna and Sophy must come back with me.’

‘I did not say I was going to keep them. You will go back in all honour.’

‘No. Yes. I will not ask you anything. I will go, Harald.’

‘I am not sure if the fishing-boat has come alongside.’ He listened. ‘Yes, there are the Greeks talking. We shall pay them well. They will take you back to the city. I hope you will give my message to the Empress, but I do not think you will.’

She did not answer. She stood up and pulled her dress straight, and tried to smooth the crumpled veil down over her hair. Harald, moving quickly, kissed her mouth and laughed and went out. Before she had quite recovered from this last thing, the two maids came rustling in. ‘Oh,’ said Sophy, ‘is it true? Will they let us go?’ And Anna: ‘What happened, my lady? Oh, we prayed for you!’

She said: ‘It seems as though your prayers were heard. Nothing happened to me. Nor, I hope, to either of you. We are going home again at once. This was – oh, a silliness, a barbarism, a boy playing stupid tricks! There is nothing else to remember or forget.’ She took two steps, looked down for some

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reason at her right hand, turning the great amethyst on the middle finger, and said: 'Anna and Sophy, you will see to it that if people must talk, as I suppose they will, nothing but the truth is told about to-day. I will not have any silly stories going round the town, and I shall blame you if they do. Be careful of this, for I am soon going to be married to John Dobronas, and it would be unfitting if there were even the shade of an untrue rumour about his wife.'

The two maids promised earnestly that it should be so. In spite of that scream, it was clear that nothing dreadful had happened to their lady. Would they ever dare to ask what had drawn the scream out of her or what had intervened between her and the Varangian? For why else had he carried her off? But for a time they knew they must be silent and discreet, and ask no questions. If it was her saint, they would know by the gifts she made.

The largest of the fishing-boats lay alongside. They were handed down with all respect. There was an escort to take them safely home; a few of the Varangians had already decided that the Emperor's pay was more certain than Harald's, his wars less dangerous, and Constantinople a better place than Norway or Kieff. Nobody wanted to keep them against their wish, and it was just as well to get rid of any faint-hearts, for the galley was over-crowded with those who had been taken on board after the sinking of the sister ship. Some of them, too, had wives in the capital. They brought with them gifts

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from their Captain, which were duly and honestly handed over to Lady Anastasia's steward the next day. They had also been trusted with money enough to build the shrine to Saint Olaf at the place where he had so fortunately appeared to his stepbrother, and they set about buying the site at once. When it was built Lady Euphemia Xiphilin came secretly and brought a very fine and ancient chalice set with rubies for the saint.

Harald Hardrada watched the boat, not till it was out of sight, for that would have been a waste of time, but until it was a decent distance away. Then he gave the word to the rowers and they set to their oars again. It was almost night. He yawned and stretched his arms and filled himself with the cool salty air and listened to the jiggling of the water against the sides of the galley. He had spent enough years in the Emperor's service. It was good to get clear of the Greeks. By now Elizabeth of Kieff would be grown tall and soft and fit to marry. He had almost a lifetime of new and exciting things to do and see. And as he turned in the light of the great lantern, hung low on the mast, Wolf, the Iclander, saw his eyes very bright and his mouth smiling a little as though all had been well ended.

THE GOAT

CARDIFF

A.D. 1935

(FOR DICK)

I SUPPOSE, if one tries to remember before the war, all these things are quite unthinkable. All that incredibly gentle, peaceful time before one was quite grown-up. We were all softer, with more raw places to our hearts, more sensibilities, less armour. I've only got to remember the plays and books I used to cry over! They make me laugh now – or just cross. Besides the war itself, there were all these extra things, of course; all that very grim business of putting down the big strikes, and then the curious brutalities we seem to like now in our amusements, beginning, perhaps, with the Rodeo and going on to the regular sort of gladiator shows they had last winter. I expect we all got used to the idea at second-hand, with all those early films, Ben Hur, for instance, where, however accidentally, some of the actors got really and genuinely killed.

Even if one doesn't go to them they do something to one's mind: something good, I suppose, in so far as it's a real frankness. And yet, if I think of myself now and, say, ten years back, I like myself much less, though perhaps I respect myself more! I should

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have been terribly shocked not so long ago by the play Tom and I went to on Wednesday; now it was just funny. But we leave our dear old Lord Chamberlain warm in his last castle and don't mention one or two names except—oh so filthily reverently! But *they* lost whatever case they had a long time ago, first over the war, then over the strikes, and they'll never pick it up again however much they Morris-dance in all the best churches.

But all this is just to say that if I'd seen the thing I've just come from twenty years ago—but then it would have been utterly impossible.

It all came about, I suppose, because Tom is on the South Wales circuit. He'd been up at the Cardiff Assizes pretty often and was sufficiently sick of them. Cardiff seems to be a bad place for contrasts: no worse than London really, I suppose, but we're all used to London, and the Haves offer their civilization some sort of compensation, and the Have-nots are often remarkably unclass-conscious. South Wales is worse, with the ship and mine-owners on one side and the dockers and miners on the other. Tom is quite enough of a wild Welshman to get terribly worked up every time he goes. It was really that sort of thing that induced him to do his extremely rapid and exciting, but rather uncomfortable, plunge in and out of politics. That was the year we got rid of Lloyd George—however it all was, and I've always supposed it was the obvious member of the National Liberal Council, though of course she was never even formally

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accused. However much one deplores even such a well-arranged political murder, it did open the way at once for all the young theorists.

I rather wish he'd been in the Government that passed this Act, all the same, though perhaps it's a game honest men are well out of, and those who easily get excited most of all. Probably no one but that particular brand of Liberal would have done it, even in the thrill of thinking they were quite a new Party. Labour, as it is now – or rather as it has been since the split-up – wouldn't have dreamt of it. I suppose there was a time when they were a real party of the Young – one seems to remember it – compact and violent enough to do this. But they've been large and old and respectable and remarkably good at not hearing third cock-crows for a long time now. It was a good Act and hasn't been repealed yet, though lots of people try not to talk about it. The thing happens in turn at various of our larger and nastier industrial towns, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, Hull, Coventry and so on. This year it was Cardiff again for South Wales. As everybody knows, all the owners have to meet, and one is chosen by lot to be legally and ritually killed, in different ways at the different places, for the good of all. The Lot business was part of that curious democratic revival there was: going right back to the real thing. I rather believed in it myself: one gets pretty sick of the representation idea; but Tom thought it was silly, and of course it has not survived as a political procedure anywhere else. But

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the whole thing seems sound, though of course the actual property and cash line, above which one becomes an owner, is rather arbitrary. It came, I expect, of the growing conviction in everyone's minds that the rich had really too good a time of it, too much protection, a too slow death-rate. And there had been the terrible after-strike years in all the big industries, and those in power felt, I think, that this was the only kind of thing short of what they really wanted – and weren't going to be given – that would at all satisfy the hunger in the minds of the Have-nots.

The last Cardiff Assizes happened just before the day, and Tom, as usual, got desperately indignant. There were, as always, terrifically harsh sentences on small crimes against property and any crimes against established sexual morality: miserable people sentenced to seven years for incest that is inevitable in the over-crowding of towns, or bestiality that is almost as inevitable in the boredom of a lonely farm: things bad for the individual most likely, but that wasn't what they were sentenced on – that wasn't what the judges grew so fierce about! These things are still kept out of the papers; personally I've never heard them discussed, never heard any anger or protest about them, except by members of the Bar: reasonably young ones – they get used to it later, as one always does get used to things. They don't really distress me so much as they do Tom. But it was in that mood that he stayed on at Cardiff after the Assizes, and wired for me to come too.

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There weren't very many strangers in the town. Most of the Circuit had gone discreetly on. We heard a lot of Welsh talked in the main streets, and Tom's voice took on that funny, rather attractive, rather alarming rapid sing-song with the sentences running up at the ends. Even I managed an occasional 'Borai da i chwi.'

We stayed at the Royal, and had kippers for breakfast.

When we went out afterwards no one seemed to be at work; all out on the pavements or blocking the streets, right across the tram-lines and everything. Sometimes they were quiet, sometimes all talking together, men in black Sunday suits and women in black shawls, and children looking none too well fed or clothed. It was a week-day, but there were thousands of men out of work about there, miners and iron-workers mostly, and they'd come in from miles around. The nearer the docks we got, the less we saw of the decent chapel-goers, and the less Welsh we heard talked. In fact, I've never seen so many nationalities, even in a big Mediterranean port, black, white, brown and yellow. But somehow it wasn't gay, like Marseilles for instance, there was no sort of sparkle about it, no good coming from the clash of races, only more dirt and odder diseases. Those new, half and half lives, that seem in sunnier places to turn to, at any rate, some vividness of intellect or artistic expression, if nothing more, had all gone grey like the stone and slate houses, and crumbled into a horrid

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religious decay, taking all the worst of chapel and mixing it with mumbo-jumbo, and dishing it up with the old sauces. It was raining pretty steadily too, all the time.

They were all talking about it, or thinking about it, and I suppose that was terrible. But I didn't think so, and I was glad to see how deserted the Salvation Army bands were. I was thinking of the Haves all over the world, the owners of ships and mines and mills and factories, and the bodies of men and women: how some are good, but others aren't and don't want to be, and all are protected by the justice of this country and most others, and by that queer feeling of property in things and persons that is one of the oldest-established evils in the world, and has been fostered by all religions and almost all laws.

The banquet of the owners was to start at 1 o'clock at the Town Hall. They were received by the Mayor and City Council in full robes, and police kept the way clear for their cars. We didn't know who more than a few of them were; they came from all over South Wales, and were mostly mine or shipowners. But the crowd knew quite amazingly and pointed them out to one another. We saw that old villain, Sir David Gunn, who broke the strike at Nantygern last year, driving up; and someone in the crowd behind us shouted: 'Oh Dai, it is you will be the Goat this year! Oh, a lovely Goat!' The old man turned and grinned out of the window of his car, and I saw his gapped teeth with little patches of gold in them. That was

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how we found out that here, at least, the one on whom the Lot fell was called the Goat. It seemed to have good precedents as a name. There were a few women among the guests, but of course the great majority are men still and so far the Lot has never fallen on a woman owner. I'm a little afraid there may be an extra fuss when it does.

All the time there was a continuous buzz of cinema cameras. The reporters were fairly obvious; quite apart from their clothes they were mostly nervous and not liking it much. Tom and I had gallery tickets and went up. The onlookers were a wonderful mixture, some local, and some representing all sorts of admirable or fantastic societies or movements or ideas. The woman next me was clearly that sort. One tried to recognize people at the banquet, but it is difficult from above. But some we did, and there were a few whom one or both of us knew a little and remembered meeting in ordinary drawing-rooms. There was one charming man, the owner of a small colliery, who had been one of the first to put in a modern pit-head installation with sunlight treatment and so on. His two small girls were going to the same school as my June. It was queer seeing him there; first it made me think of the war and seeing one's friends off at Victoria by the leave-trains that took them to a much higher chance of death, and of death that would probably do far less good to anyone.

The actual meal lasted for some time; there was some goodish music, and they were being given a good

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deal to drink, though a curiously large number seemed to be teetotalers. They had each drawn their number after the soup – *bisque d'homard* and marvellous it smelt, even up in the gallery – and presumably each knew his by heart now. Most of them shoved that horrible little white disc under their bread-plates, where at least it wouldn't appear till dessert.

The dinner seemed to take a very long time, and inevitably one got rather strung up towards the end. At least, a good many in that gallery were; I don't think I was much. Probably I would have been twelve years ago, even, but now I have a curious feeling of security – a security based on pain overcome, bad things seen and accepted as being themselves, and also partly on hate, not the lively forward-looking hate of youth, but the much more firmly-seated thing one gets in middle age. But then I'm English. Tom had been queerly excited at first, but after a time he calmed down and began to think, and talk to me in a whisper, about justice, which is a thing that, contrary to most people's ideas, is quite often thought about by quite a lot of lawyers. It seemed to us as likely that this was justice as that anything at the Assizes had been. We wondered, for the thousandth time, whether it was even worth considering the possibility of a world where justice would not be needed, as Aristotle says it is not needed among friends. As one grows older, it seems less and less likely that there will ever be a world of friends, any more than there will ever be a world of Aristotles.

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The numbers were put into a very beautiful silver jar with a narrow neck and stirred about. The Mayor of Cardiff took the jar. He seemed to everyone to hesitate for rather a long time. Then he dipped quickly, took out the number, and read it in a loud voice. At first I only saw the relief everywhere, a general sense of movement and loosening, most curiously and obviously the sudden reddening of white faces. Then I saw where it had happened, the neighbours hastily pouring out drinks, moving all round him, jerky and half struck themselves like people in a bombed London street after the Zeppelin had passed. It was not anyone we even knew by sight; for a minute we couldn't find out – there were two or three names bumping about in the gallery before it finally settled down to one of the partners in a shipping firm with offices in Cardiff itself: middle-aged, married, it was thought a family: a house in the suburbs, we heard, with two greenhouses: he played golf on Saturdays. Someone said he was a Baptist, and someone else laughed rather destructively at the idea. As far as I could see – he was in no state to mind how much we all stared – he was quite an undistinguished man, rather large, with a brown fringe round his bald patch, and broad hands that one noticed rather, because he kept clutching at things.

Suddenly I found myself, in the way one does, arguing with the woman next me. I think I began by muttering: 'Do stop saying, "It's terrible!" What do you mean?'

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She said: 'He is alive now, and in two hours he will be dead.'

I said: 'That's what happens to everyone sooner or later.'

And she said: 'But he knows it.'

And I: 'Why shouldn't he? What's the difference between two hours and twenty years?'

Then she used what, I suppose, was her strongest argument. She grabbed me with both hands and said: 'Look!' I expect she must be very good at her movement, whatever it is, because she can make one see things through her eyes. Besides, she reminded me of a girl I knew in the Fulham Branch, ever so long ago, who ran away later with an Austrian painter, and then became a Moravian or something – I'd been very fond of her in the way one used to be when one was still very sensitive to things and people. So, for a moment, thinking of her, I saw the man below through this other woman's feeling for him, so that my heart beat too, with horror of approaching and inevitable death, and I tried, too, to know how it would be if I had been the chosen one.

Then she breathed too loud in my ear, and I came back with a bump into myself, away from him, and I said: 'Yes, but you look at the others.'

So she looked in turn, at the rest of the people in the hall, and then round at the others in the gallery, and saw their faces, which were mostly full of some terrific intellectual curiosity and sometimes – 'They're glad!' she said. And then, as if she were answering

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me, though goodness knows I hadn't said it: 'But when one man dies for the people, he has to be somehow Divine, and he must surely choose it. Not a poor frightened rabbit!'

I said: 'We can't afford to give up the Good. They're food, their minds are eaten like bread by those who love them. Why take them of all people? And it doesn't make any difference whether the one man chooses or not: it's the people, not him, that it all matters to!'

She looked again, and said: 'But they're not being saved!'

I said: 'Not these ones. After all, we're mostly Haves; we're supposed to be able to save ourselves. It's the ones who'll see it at the docks who may be saved: the ones who die by factory accidents, and shunting engines, and over-loaded ships – or simply through not getting quite enough to eat or quite enough room to live. It's not much to give them – one man among so many! Do you realize, by the way, that it's just a hundred and three years since the Reform Bill? And as to us: you're all soft, aren't you? Like people used to be.'

She said, violently: 'I have never let myself lose Love! – whatever else I lost.'

I wondered what the other things were that she had lost, and I began to try and explain the idea of hardness: of accepting the world as it is, not so as to stop trying to alter it, but so as not to break oneself and one's own usefulness as a tool in doing so: not to

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think that everyone is like oneself, and ought to want the same help and the same good, but to let them go their own way: to live less by logic and more by experience. But it was like talking to a child. Well, I suppose some people never do grow up.

Tom had been arguing too, but I'm not quite sure what about – I don't know how the other man started! But they were talking hard, first about shipping statistics, and then about the carrying trade and how and why it has shifted from one country to another. It was interesting and soothing and very remote from the shipowner himself. I listened for some time. It was difficult to tell what was happening below, particularly now that it was all a little blued with cigar smoke. I was not going to do what I knew was silly and wasteful: put myself into that man's mind again. He was, at any rate, sitting calmly enough, drinking occasionally, with a small group round him that changed sometimes.

It was still raining when we went out, and still this restless, trembling, whispering crowd. 'Well,' said Tom, 'shall we go down to the docks?' I heard his voice a little sharp and eager on the consonants and knew that inside he was really much more excited than I was.

There was no possibility of driving or even getting a tram. We walked through the town, taking short cuts through odd, deserted little streets with draggled greengrocers' shops at the corners and every window shut. Tom has that curious sense of direction in a

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town that always seems to me to depend less on geography than on a kind of feeling for the angles of street crossings. Neither of us talked much; I suppose we were really both sharing too much emotion.

When we got to the docks it didn't seem possible to come near the place; one couldn't even see how many deep the crowd was. Great patches of it were singing, rather impressively, though not so much as if they had been all Welsh: hymns, of course, and sometimes one of the strike songs, 'Now she calls,' or 'The Workers' Morning,' either in English or, better, in Welsh, that hid the curious poverty in language in the original. Sometimes even the respectable old 'Red Flag' – though I remember the time when that was exciting enough. Occasionally a music-hall song started, and then petered out. I don't like crowds much, or that way of losing oneself; I'd sooner get frankly drunk or drugged without any pretence. Besides – I know the world is a bad place and that my class hasn't on the whole been or done much good, with all the chances it has had, I mean; I know it is time for a change, and that now there is no longer any fountain-head of nations wherever it was in Central Asia to pour in that fierce new wine of conquest and break the old bottles, the best way to get a new civilization is probably through a turning upside down. But I know, too, that it will be a very long time – not long for history, but desperately long for the individual – before this barbarous crowd, from whom one is, really, so far apart, begins to pro-

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duce their new Arts and Literature. It's a bad business being at the end of a period of civilization. But all the more reason to be hard, as so much of Rome was hard, and perhaps to be stupid, as the Byzantines were stupid. So Tom and I stood about with our shoes and stockings soaked through, at the edge of that crowd, and knew how little we and they understood one another.

Then a man came up and spoke to Tom, pulling him away and whispering to him, and after a moment Tom turned round to me: 'We are being most kindly offered a place on one of the barges by my friend Mr. Evans,' and he introduced us formally. When Mr. Evans was scurrying along in front of us he said into my ear: 'I won a case for him last week: a bit of a tough, but you should have seen the other side!' I wondered what the case was about, but couldn't ask just then. Tom's ex-client certainly looked capable of any of the more solid and practical forms of crime!

We went down a back street full of delightful ship-chandlers' shops, that ended with steps down and an iron rail to hold on to. The water smelt and looked remarkably nasty, a mixture of Bristol Channel mud with the inevitable dock filth of even a modern city. Just not slipping as we got on board the barge, I couldn't help thinking how very unpleasant it would be to be drowned in. Even if, as they all said very loud, he was drunk and warm with brandy.

The barge steamed off and round the corner to its place in a great semi-circle of them at the dock mouth.

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Most seemed full of the same sort of people, come to look on at this thrill, guaranteed real, no cinema effects. But there was at least one official barge as well. I was introduced to the owner's wife, who was dressed in a tactful sort of quarter mourning with purple feathers, and obviously was much puzzled at what attitude to take up. She didn't think her husband's was quite nice or suitable, but could not make up the thing she called her mind, poor dear, what was! Most of the men on the barge were owners of a sort, but not yet rich enough to qualify. They laughed rather violently, and had a good many whiskies themselves. I think they were definitely more barbarian than the crowd, with a queer sort of brutality that one would never get, say, in a Balkan State, and hardly even in France. They all rushed forward into the bows as soon as there was anything to see, and the barge tipped, but no one seemed to notice.

Neither Tom nor I saw much of the actual business of the drowning of the Goat. One can imagine that sort of thing quite well enough not to have to look closely. Besides, we were too far off to see much. When I saw the group of them come down the cleared space at the dock-head, I didn't go on looking. There was no possible psychological interest in it and as little beauty as in a real crucifixion before the artists have been at work on it. But we could tell what was happening by the crowd. When they began singing 'All through the night' to steady themselves.

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When they stopped singing altogether and umbrellas went down and faces were little and white above the dirty black of cheap clothes. The minutes that lasted, while our friends on the barge were subdued into whispered swearing and we caught ourselves listening rather too acutely. And then when it was over and one could get free of the terrible and half-religious feeling that one had felt coming on and swamping one – oh, a horrible thing! I think everyone on the barge felt something of the same relief, though they couldn't express it adequately. But their language, such as it was, was wonderful! Mrs. Evans led me away on tiptoe into the barge's cabin and we sucked peppermints. Yet I know it was a different kind of thing that the others felt, the dockers and the miners and the iron-workers; only what exactly it was I don't quite know, and I suppose I never shall. It is at times like these that one understands the depth of the difference between us and them.

We didn't go with the other millions to see the body: we'd had enough crowds by then. There was high tea with Tom's lay client, and I talked to his wife about the diseases of canaries, I think, and how sad about the dear Prince never marrying, and how to turn the heels of knitted stockings. Then we went back to our hotel. We both slept pretty well, for, after all, plenty of men have died for the people one way and another, and plenty of one's own friends have died, so why lose sleep over a stranger?